

The Magician Who Rose From Failure:

Tales of War and Magic

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Illustrator:
**Saika
Fushimi**



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Prologue

That night, Arcus Raytheft, son to the viscount, had a peculiar dream.

He dreamed of the life of a certain man, who lived in a world unlike any Arcus had ever seen. Unlike Arcus, this man was born to an ordinary family and lived an ordinary life. During his teens and early twenties, he dedicated his life to studying before dying suddenly in an accident.

In a way, it was like Arcus lived that man's life through his dream.

He learned of that world's history and culture with that man at school.

He learned of an art named "science," something which didn't exist in Arcus's world.

He won competitions.

Made friends.

Fell in love.

The majority of Arcus's dreams were vague and nonsensical, yet this dream in particular was so vivid and real, it almost seemed entangled with reality itself. It even made Arcus wonder if the life he had accepted as reality was, in fact, a dream, and the man he thought he dreamed of was his true self.

Perhaps Arcus didn't truly exist, and his entire life was nothing but a dream the man saw in his final moments.

The only thing that was certain was that this long, long dream had a profound effect on Arcus. He could barely believe that the bed he woke up in was really his. It was as if the man he dreamed of had stolen his entire sense of identity.

They did say that people were shaped by their experiences. Perhaps the same could be said for dreams, or perhaps not, but through that vision, Arcus had matured and grown to think like an adult, despite his young age of six.

What affected him most was the loss of that man's lover just before their

wedding. Arcus found himself weeping at the very thought of it, just as if it was his own lover that he had lost. There was no doubt: that man was now a part of Arcus.

That day, Arcus broke into a fever. His dream was only one of the factors that caused it. His temperature shot up, and his condition deteriorated rapidly. It reminded him of when the man in his dream was suffering from the flu.

As Arcus lay in bed, he was visited by a couple. The man's hair was silver, while the woman had brown hair, a much more common color in this world. Arcus was extremely familiar with the pair.

They were his parents: Joshua and Celine Raytheft.

"Mother... Father..." Arcus croaked. Even in his current state, he wanted to call for his parents.

He wanted them to save him.

The expressions on their faces as they looked at him instantly twisted.

"The child certainly puts up a fight," remarked his mother, as though Arcus were a worm she had just spotted on the ground. His father grunted in agreement.

Despite Arcus's fever, his parents' gaze sent a chill through his spine as memories began to resurface.

Arcus lacked a talent for magic, and so he had been denied his position as the Raythefts' heir.

This is the story of how Arcus Raytheft, a six-year-old boy, began to work his way back to the top with another man's memories.

Part 1: The Disinherited Boy

Arcus stared out of the window and sighed for the umpteenth time. The window looked out on the Raythefts' well-kept garden, trees, and a great number of stone houses. In terms of civilization and culture, Arcus's world was much like the medieval Europe of the man's world. Unlike that man's world, the buildings here were not made of reinforced concrete, but stones and wood.

Needless to say, motor vehicles were also non-existent. Most people traveled by horse and carriage. Television, gas cookers, air conditioning, refrigerators... none of these things existed in Arcus's world.

They did, however, have lighting, water, and sewage systems, which was something. Not that those things comforted Arcus, who had experienced the wonders of the other world through his dream, but that wasn't why he was sighing so much anyway.

His anguish arose from the condition of his estate.

Even after his fever went down, his parents treated him just as poorly as ever. Before Arcus's magical abilities were tested, his parents regarded him and his younger sister like there was nothing dearer to them in the world. Now Arcus was treated like dirt.

"And I am no longer the heir..."

It had only been a short time before Arcus dreamed of the other world that he was barred from his inheritance. It all came down to magic and the weight it carried in this world.

In that man's world, magic belonged to fiction and quackery. Here, it really existed.

The Raythefts only held a viscountcy among the gentry, but it was a position they'd maintained since the ascension of the first King. They were a military family, and it was the founder's use of magic on the battlefield that earned him a position of nobility, beginning the Raytheft line. The house's standing could

not survive an heir weak in the Arts.

When Arcus's aether was assessed by the family a few weeks ago, he failed to achieve even an average score.

The test was simple. The examinee was asked to use magic to create ripples through the surface of a large pond and scored on how long they could sustain the effort. Most Raythefts could go for an hour or more. Arcus, however, didn't even last three minutes.

Ever since then, his parents looked at and spoke to him like he was pure filth. They called him "a disgrace," "talentless," and sometimes even "a mutt." It was an abhorrent way to treat a six-year-old. In her more enraged moments, his mother even struck him.

Arcus had tried desperately to improve his magic skills ever since. If he could do that much, then maybe his parents would return to the loving mother and father he used to know.

Arcus had torn the family's library apart looking for some way to increase his magical power. He even asked the servants if they knew how. In the end, it seemed it was impossible after all, and even when his parents learned of his efforts, their attitude toward him did not change.

That was how Arcus ended up bedridden with a fever. He thought back to his mother's words.

"It's as though she wished me dead..." he murmured glumly.

They upset him, of course, but what he felt lately was a pain that stayed with him and weighed on him in a way grief didn't. Those words of hers made him worry about the future. Would they really carry on looking after him here at the estate? Were they planning to throw him out onto the street now that he survived his fever?

Either way, Arcus considered his dream of that man to be a great blessing. He had matured through that dream, and now the prospect of being abandoned by his parents didn't seem as scary as it may have in the past. That wasn't to say the idea filled him with joy either, but he realized that there was no point now in trying to win back their love.

As he gazed at the gloomy sky outside his window, there was a knock at the door.

“Brother!” Lecia Raytheft, Arcus’s sister, entered without waiting for a reply.

She was an adorable child, her hair, as silver as Arcus’, bound up in a ponytail. She marched up to her brother.

“Play with me!” she demanded.

“If you want me to, I will,” Arcus replied. “But are you sure it’s okay?”

“Okay?” his sister echoed.

“Surely Mother and Father have told you to stay away from me?”

“Uh-huh! Mother told me not to go near you!” Lecia announced proudly.

Arcus wasn’t surprised in the least, though he hadn’t expected Lecia’s rebellious streak.

“I just wanna play with you!” Lecia repeated.

“All right,” Arcus replied, getting to his feet.

He enjoyed playing with his little sister. He hoped this wouldn’t end up being the last time. He knew better than to expect anything; since he was no longer the heir to the Raytheft estate, his sister would replace him—especially since she had far outperformed Arcus in the magic test.

Celine had come to hate the idea that Lecia should associate with Arcus and would take any opportunity she could to badmouth him in front of his sister. Lecia still seemed to adore him at the moment, but there was no telling what would change with time under his parents’ education.

Lecia...

Arcus studied his younger sister as she smiled at him sweetly. They weren’t actually brother and sister but cousins. While Joshua Raytheft, the head of the family, was Arcus’s father, Lecia was the daughter of Joshua’s brother, the late Dudlis Raytheft.

Arcus’s memory of their first meeting was vague, but he recalled that Lecia

was introduced to him as his cousin. When her father was killed the following year in a war with a neighboring nation, Joshua took Lecia in.

Arcus and Lecia were brought up together as siblings of the same age. His parents were probably relieved now that they had done so, but Arcus himself wasn't sure how he felt about it.

"What's wrong?" Lecia suddenly asked.

"Nothing," Arcus reassured her. "What did you want to play today?"

"Um... Ummm..."

And so Arcus ended up spending the majority of the day playing with Lecia.

The next day, he was called into Celine's room to be disciplined.

"I thought I told you to stay away from Lecia!" Celine's shrieks pierced Arcus's ears as she stood above him.

So long as Celine caught wind of it, Arcus knew he could expect this treatment every time he and Lecia crossed paths from now on. There was nothing he could do in response but shrink back and apologize.

"I'm sorry, Mother."

"'Sorry' isn't going to cut it! If your worthlessness rubs off on her, what then?! Would you try to fix that with an apology, too?!"

Arcus knew full well that "worthlessness," as she put it, wasn't contagious. But he barely finished the thought before he felt a sharp impact against his cheek. Despair and frustration at his helplessness welled up inside him.

"I'm... I'm sorry."

"Listen, you filthy mutt! I'm warning you now! Stay away from Lecia!"

She gave him a drawn-out beating. Arcus bit his lip as hard as he could, trying to bear the pain.

"Why did God curse me with a waste of space like you? Why couldn't you be more like the Lazrael heir? He's overflowing with magical power!" Pulling out a handkerchief, Celine began to dab at her eyes dramatically, like she was

suffering most of all. She barely finished her act before she was back to screaming again. “Next time you do something like this, don’t even think that I won’t use my magic on you!”

“Yes, Mother.”

Finally free of his mother’s wrath, Arcus left the room. On his way back to his bedroom, he heard the servants whispering.

“There he is! The Raythefts’ failure of a son!”

“Look at his face! His mother’s punishment made him cry!”

“To think he was born to the viscount, and yet his magic skills are so pathetic!”

“He’s a disgrace to the family! I don’t understand why they haven’t gotten rid of him yet!”

Without magical talent, he found himself beneath even their concern. He took solace in the fact that not every servant participated in this harmful gossip. It was only those who knew how to use magic themselves; those who didn’t sympathized with him.

After finally returning to his room, Arcus closed the door. His legs trembled, like all the tension holding him up had drained from his body.

“It doesn’t matter... It doesn’t mean anything...”

It didn’t matter. Arcus knew that; he had experienced over twenty years of another man’s life. Being hated and hit by his own mother wasn’t a big deal at all. It didn’t affect him. There was no reason for him to feel anything at all. He only had to think of his parents as his mother and father in name only.

Arcus’s true mother was the gentle woman who raised the man in his dream. As long as he believed that, he had no reason to break down here. He had no need to be jealous in the least...

A sob escaped his throat. Soon, his eyes were burning. There was no stopping now. Something snapping inside him, Arcus began to bawl. Why did his parents treat him so cruelly, when less than a month ago, they treated him so tenderly?

They would stroke his head and hold him tightly. Even if he whined, they would smile without scolding him for it. Now they saw him as dead weight. Was this really how his mother was going to treat the son she carried for nine months?

Perhaps it was right to shout at your child just because they were talentless.

Maybe it was normal to hit them and treat them roughly.

Arcus had lived another man's life now. He wasn't the same boy he was before. And yet, he found he was powerless to resist the emotions the man had endured.

But why? He saw countless hardships through that man's eyes. He was bullied through elementary school, which led him to become the class clown until college, where he could finally spend his days as he wanted. That entire time, he carried on.

That man's life had taught Arcus how to stand strong. Why couldn't he stand strong now?

Arcus howled, the emotions he could no longer hold back streaming down his face as tears. When his throat dried and his tears stopped, he stayed curled up against his bedroom door.

He didn't know how long he stayed there like that. Before he knew it, the sun disappeared, and the view outside the window darkened. Opening the door behind him, he found a trolley laden with a meal. A servant who sympathized with him must have left it there. His stomach empty from crying, Arcus couldn't hold back his appetite.

"Magic..." he murmured to himself as he dipped a slice of bread into the cold soup.

Magic. Magic was the reason he was in this mess. It was because he lacked magic ability that he was removed from the position of heir. It was because he lacked magic ability that his parents' love for him ran dry.

A thought flashed in his mind.

If he became a magician more powerful than anybody had ever seen, he could

show his parents that they were wrong.

Arcus bit off a clump of bread. He knew it was a childish thought, but the idea appealed to him. There was something else, too.

“...I miss hamburgers.”

And could you really blame him?

The truth was, while it was far from enough to satisfy his parents, Arcus actually possessed a fraction more ability than the average magician. He could use some level of magic, but it wasn't like he was destined to become the greatest magician the world had ever seen, either. If he put the work in, there was a chance he would be able to find some way to increase his aether. He had failed before, but that was when he was a normal six-year-old. If he could bend his new memories of the other world and its technological wonders to his advantage, then the results might be different this time around. His determination renewed, Arcus set to work rereading all his family's grimoires.

Magic is the power to bring all sorts of phenomena to life, using mystical words to create spells.

That was probably the simplest way to sum up what magic was in this world. Based on this definition alone, the magic of this world seemed to be less limited than the magic described in the books Arcus knew from the man's world. All you needed was to put certain words together, and you could make all sorts of things happen. As long as you could create a spell, countless possibilities lay before you.

When the books spoke of “mystical words,” they weren't referring to a modern language, but to the Elder Tongue, whose roots were in the very origins of society. It was written in characters known as artglyphs, which looked similar to astrological and zodiac symbols from the man's world. Each word of this language held power related to its meaning, and assembling those words into a sentence or phrase would create a spell, waiting to be used.

What happened as a result of those words largely depended on the magician's intention, but as long as you memorized the Elder Tongue, in theory you could use magic to do almost anything.

The book went on to describe that to use the language, you had to put an appropriate amount of magical power into each word. If you got the amount wrong, the spell would fail. In other words, the idea of “overclocking” a spell was mere fantasy. Not that it really mattered to Arcus, who wouldn’t have enough aether for that in the first place. The amount of aether you possessed determined a sorcerer’s staying power.

To sum up, Arcus needed to learn the right words and how to arrange them into spells (that, or knowledge of extant spells), and how much magical power to put into each word.

Alongside his studies of the language they spoke at home, Arcus had also been learning the Elder Tongue, and so he already had a decent understanding of it. When casting a spell, it was important to picture your intention vividly. Thanks to that man’s memories, Arcus now had a whole host of imagery that he could draw on—things he witnessed in real life and in films, comics, and cartoons...

“All that’s left now is aether and spells...” he murmured to himself.

In preparation for the test he had taken, Arcus studied how to control his aether to a certain extent, so that wouldn’t really be an issue. In terms of spells, he just had to learn those that already existed, how to make his own, and how much power was consumed upon casting them. On this front, he was out of leads; he’d bled the book dry.

It wasn’t worth considering asking his parents, and the magic users among the servants likely wouldn’t help him, either. At this point, Arcus would have been well within his rights to give up.

“I’ll make this work.”

The truth was, he had someone in mind who he thought might be willing to help him out.

A few days after Arcus gathered his resolve to become a magician, the Raythefts received a visit.

“Brother.”

“Hey, Joshua. Been a while, huh?”

In the Raythefts’ drawing room stood Arcus’s father, Joshua, and a man who looked much like him, with the same silvery hair. Unlike Joshua, this man had much more of a working-class air about him. His muscular body, browned from the sun, had a few burn marks here and there that spoke of his return from the battlefield.

His name was Craib Abend, and he was Joshua’s elder brother, although he had absconded from the Raytheft estate years ago.

The reason for his defection was to do with his aether.

When it came to choosing an heir for the Raytheft name, Joshua had been chosen, simply because he had more aether than his brother. Craib quarreled with Arcus’s grandfather about it, which eventually led to his decision to leave.

He could still show his face to the head of the Raytheft estate and still be considered that man’s brother for one reason. Craib had studied and worked incredibly hard in exile. When he came back to fight in the war, he achieved success after success, eventually receiving an important office within the military from the king. His true strength ended up far exceeding his brother’s talent in the Arts. As a baron, Joshua still outranked Craib among the gentry, but within the military, their roles were reversed.

Craib didn’t associate much with the Raythefts, but he dropped by when he was moving between military posts, just to check in on his family.

“Hey, Arcus! How’re you doing?” Craib grinned as he spotted his nephew.

“I am well, thank you. It has been a long time. I am glad to see you are well, too,” Arcus replied.

“Since when did you speak so much like a grown-up, huh? Is this what they’re teaching you in those fancy ‘heir’ classes?” Craib let out a hearty laugh, apparently overjoyed to see his nephew maturing so fast.

Arcus’s uncle was always so open and straightforward; Arcus found him very approachable. Joshua, however, did not look so pleased.

“Arcus is no longer the heir to the Raytheft estate.”

There was a pause.

“What?!” Craib’s eyes widened in surprise.

“His aether is far too low for our standards. Lecia shall be taking his position as heir,” Joshua explained.

Lecia, who was sitting next to her father, shot an anxious glance at Arcus. He couldn’t blame her; she was put in an extremely awkward position. Suddenly, Craib narrowed his eyes.

“Don’t tell me that’s why you ain’t letting him sit on the couch?”

“That is indeed why,” came the response.

Arcus alone was being made to stand behind the rest of the family as they sat, on Joshua’s orders. Though his father was treating Arcus like a servant, he likely saw him as even less than that. Craib’s expression crumpled into a frown.

“Look, even if he ain’t got that much power, don’t you think it’s kinda early to be making that decision? He could still have potential, y’know.”

“Please,” Joshua scoffed. “You should know more than anybody that aether doesn’t increase over time.”

Craib let out an exaggerated sigh before turning his frustrated gaze back toward Joshua.

“You remember what Dad said to us before he died, right?”

It seemed he struck a nerve.

“Things are different now!” Joshua protested. “The fact is that the boy simply hasn’t enough aether to be worthy to lead the house!”

“Hey! That ‘boy’ is your son! At least treat him like your own flesh and blood!” Craib shouted, raising his voice to a level above Joshua’s.

“He is no longer the heir; therefore, he is no longer my son! The moment his lack of power was established, he became a worthless mutt!”

It was like a frigid wind swept through the room. Arcus nearly shivered. Joshua swallowed, clearly panicked, and Arcus put together that Craib’s anger was the source of that tension.

"I can't believe you're saying this in front of your own son," Craib muttered darkly.

"Wh-Why shouldn't I? Such a talentless creature is of no use to the House of Raytheft."

"So you ended up like our piece of crap dad after all," Craib spat.

He wasn't just looking at Joshua now, either, but Celine too. Having played her own part in disowning Arcus', she cast her gaze away. Neither of them able to look him in the eye, and the servants shivering behind them, Craib started to calm. He turned to look at Arcus sympathetically.

"C'mon. The kid's only six years old."

"We are a family known for our military prowess. If we must cut a member out to protect that family, we should not hesitate."

"You're gonna say that in front of him, too. You must be crazy," Craib said, exasperated.

This was Arcus's chance.

"Uncle," he began. "Uncle, I have a favor to ask of you."

"What's up?"

"I would like you to teach me about magic."

"Ar-Arcus! Y-You little..."

Joshua scowled at his son; Arcus met his gaze head-on. There was nothing to be scared of anymore. He let out all the tears he could spare days ago. His parents could glare at him and hit him all they liked, but he swore he would never let them make him cry ever again. From now on, he was prepared to stand up against them.

Craib stared at Arcus, taken aback by his words.

"Are you sure, Arcus?"

"Yes. I am sure."

He was doing the right thing. In fact, this was all he could do. In getting so angry on his behalf, Craib proved Arcus could trust him.

Arcus nodded, watching as the confusion in Craib's eyes turned to admiration. It didn't take long for Joshua to interject.

"Stop right there!" he shouted. "How dare you ridicule the name of Raytheft like this?!"

"That is not my intention. In fact, I am doing this *for* the family."

Arcus's unexpected words and nonchalant tone merely provoked Joshua's rage further.

"What utter nonsense!"

"If I prove that I have talent, then there should be no reason for the family to be ashamed of me. Am I wrong?"

Arcus was doing his very best to take a dig at Joshua. That he was doing so in front of Craib, who had already proven himself worthy, made his words all the more effective. Just as Arcus expected, the venom in his father's gaze increased. In terms of his position within the family, Arcus could fall no lower, and so there was no way to make him regret this. He no longer cared how much his father came to hate him.

"Why, you..." Joshua began, but Craib interrupted him with a hearty laugh.

"C'mon, Joshua! It's too early to decide he's gonna shame the family! Or are you saying I showed you and Dad up, just 'cause I made something outta my life?"

"Brother!" Joshua's face turned red as hot iron at Craib's barb.

Craib stuck his tongue out at his brother as he raged.

"Okay, Arcus! I'll teach ya! You'll be a fine magician once I'm done with you!"

And that was how Arcus's uncle, Craib Abend, became his magic teacher.

The following day, Craib took Arcus to his home in the royal capital. There in the garden, he began a magical demonstration.

Craib stood in front of Arcus, a bandana wrapped around his silver hair and his military jacket hung over his short-sleeved shirt. His tanned, muscular arms

were folded in front of his chest. He looked much more like a fighter than any sort of magician, but despite his appearance, he was known across the land as a scholar of magic—not that he wasn’t also a fine man-at-arms.

“First I wanna see how much you already know,” Craib began.

“Yes, sir!”

“You got spunk! I like it!” Craib grinned.

“Right! I’m determined to show Mother and Father that they misjudged me!” Arcus declared.

“Now that’s what I’m talking about!” Craib let out a hearty laugh. “Now, how much of the basics of magic do you know?”

“According to my readings, to use magic you need to know both artglyphs and the Elder Tongue. You use those to create a spell, which you then recite and imbue with your magical power.”

“Yup. You hit the nail on the head. Now, what do you need to learn artglyphs and their language?”

“A dictionary,” Arcus replied.

“That’s enough to brush up on them,” Craib agreed, “but just that won’t do if you’re serious about becoming a magician.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

Arcus was shocked. All he used in his studies at home was a dictionary, and so he thought that would be enough. He was starting to realize that his knowledge of magic still barely scratched the surface of what there was to learn.

“You’ll be needing one of these.” Putting his hand into a bag he’d come prepared with, Craib pulled out one of the thickest books Arcus had ever seen. Arcus gawked at it.

“These are the Ancient Chronicles. *The Birth of Heaven and Earth* documents the creation of the earth and sky. *The Spiritual Age* is a record of the time when spirits wandered Earth. *The Prophecy of Shadows* predicts the entire history and

future of this world. *Documenting the Stars* describes a scholar's life as he follows the sky and the movements of the planets. *The Magician's Elegy* speaks about civilization as it was when magic flourished, and then there's *Demons and Society's Collapse*. That one's about the four powerful demons who will come and destroy the world—it's got the Song of Destruction in it. They say the entirety of the Elder Tongue is recorded in these six titles, but..."

"But?" Arcus prompted.

"No one actually knows if every last word is written in them. There's no one who can actually read them all anyway," Craib explained.

"Not even you?"

"Not even me. 'Specially *The Prophecy of Shadows*." Craib grinned. "I have no clue what the author's on about."

"So these are the six books you should use to study the Language of the Ancient Arts?" Arcus asked.

"Yup. Just learning words and phrases ain't enough. If you don't understand where those words came from or how to use them, there's no way you're gonna tap into their power. That's why reading the Chronicles is the best way to wrap your head around the language. And you gotta, if you wanna become a real magician."

"All right." Arcus took the book from his uncle.

"This is just one volume, by the way. There's a ton more to it; I'll get one of my servants to get the rest later."

"But this one alone is so thick..." Arcus grimaced as he thought about just how much reading he was going to need to do.

All of a sudden, Craib's expression became serious.

"Listen, Arcus. These Chronicles aren't just any old stories. People have been studying this language for ages before you and I were born. There are still tons of characters we don't know how to sound out, or what they mean. Even if you can read it, there's a lot that's gonna just sound like nonsense, and sometimes you won't have a clue what it's supposed to be about."

“Supposing I was able to decipher the entire thing?” Arcus asked curiously.

“Your name would go down in history. But you wanna be able to walk before you run,” Craib added.

Perhaps that would be true under normal circumstances, but Arcus had access to a whole wealth of understanding that everyone in this world had yet to achieve, thanks to his dream.

Before I get too far ahead of myself, though, I'll need to learn those glyphs. And it doesn't look like it's going to be easy...

Deciding he would just have to take his time with it, Arcus returned his attention to Craib.

“So, on the one hand, you've got your language to learn. What else have you gotta learn along with that?” Craib asked.

“How to control my aether?”

“Yup! You got it. I see you've done your homework.” Craib broke into a smile at Arcus's instant response.

Magic consumed the caster's aether in order to create a specific effect, but just reciting the spell wouldn't automatically consume it; instead, you had to prepare the right amount of power beforehand. This meant you had to learn to regulate your aether so that you could put just the right amount into each spell.

“You've already learned how to control your own power, right?” Craib asked.

“Yes, sir,” replied Arcus.

“All right. But just in case, I'm gonna start from the basics. Magic feels like warm water flowing through your body. If you learn to control it, it means you can manipulate it, focus it, split it up into parts, or send it outside your body.”

Arcus closed his eyes and focused on the sensation inside him. He could feel it deep within his belly as a warm, shapeless glow, neither liquid nor vapor.

“Whenever you're not doing anything else, you should practice moving that power around your body. If you keep that up, soon you'll be able to move it as easily as your arms and legs,” said Craib.

“Yes, sir.”

“Your goal should be to be able to move that power even when you’re doing simple physical tasks. Then you’ll be able to keep it up for days on end.”

Arcus nodded. The way Craib was speaking right now told him that this point in particular was very important.

“By the way, once you get good at this, you’ll be able to feel magic from places outside your own body,” Craib added.

“Really?”

“Yep. And I was the one who discovered it! Whaddya think of that, huh?” Craib puffed out his broad chest proudly before bursting out into embarrassed laughter. “As you probably know, I left the Raytheft house and passed the heirship over to Joshua. Everyone mocked me for it, and I hated that, so I went on a journey to look for ways I could increase my aether.”

Arcus nodded. “I have heard as much.”

“I tried all kinds of stuff. Ate all kinds of foods that were s’posed to increase your magic, practiced magic as much as I could before my body gave out to raise my stamina... But none of that worked. What I did learn, though, was how to detect the presence of magic.”

Craib seemed proud of his discovery. Arcus had never read anything about detecting magic before, so it was likely his uncle was the first to discover it. He had every reason to be proud. But that wasn’t all.

“You realized what that means yet?”

“Yes, sir. If you can detect the presence of magic, then you should be able to track the location of humans and other creatures that use it.”

“Bingo. ’Cause humans, demons, monsters, and things like that all have magic inside them.”

“Can you also tell how many of them there are?” Arcus asked.

“Yeah, ’course.”

It sounded like a very useful skill indeed, especially in a situation where you

wanted to keep clear of anything hostile.

“It’ll take some time before you’re at that level, though. But it’s a pretty handy skill! If you start working on that now, you’ll learn before you know it!” Suddenly, Craib grinned. “Joshua can’t do it, y’know.”

In other words, just by learning how to detect magic, Arcus would have already surpassed his father.

“Does that mean you never told him about it?” asked Arcus.

“You really think I go around shoutin’ about my secret techniques? Nah. He might be my brother, but he hasn’t earned it.”

“You two really don’t get along well, do you?”

“We used to. But whatever, I’ll tell you about that another time.” Craib patted Arcus on the head. “Anyway! Time to show you some real magic!”

“Yes, sir!” Arcus responded eagerly, raising his hands in the air. He was waiting for this.

“It’ll be good for you to see some real magic in action. If you wanna be a top magician, it’s vital to have models to reference at the image-forming stage.”

“Is that something you learned on your travels too?”

“You know it! I wouldn’t be who I am today without all the magic I saw in all sorts of different places.” Again, Craib puffed out his chest. “Arcus. You ever seen real magic before?”

“Only the once,” Arcus replied, “and not since then.”

“Gotcha. Then I’ll start with psychokinesis, since that’s pretty basic.”

Picking up a stone from the ground, Craib launched it through the air. The stone rolled along the ground before losing all its momentum and coming to a stop on the lawn. Craib raised his hand toward it.

“Guide the object according to my will.”

Craib recited the spell in the Elder Tongue. Luminous artglyphs rose up around him.

The stone began to float.



“It’s moving!” Arcus cried.

“This is psychokinesis,” Craib explained. “It lets you move objects wherever you want.”

Craib steered the stone around a while before finally allowing it to rest. The artglyphs formed by his words broke down and scattered into the air. For a time, their light remained, but soon that too was gone.

“This is a simple spell that you’ll find in any book. You know that you don’t have to copy my spell word for word, right?”

“As long as my words mean that I want it to move, my spell will have the same effect, yes?” Arcus said.

“That’s it. You can’t just stick any old words together, though. You gotta be careful with it, or the words might fight back or contradict each other, and you won’t be able to do anything at all. You have a lot of freedom when it comes to the words you use, but you still gotta make sure they’re the right ones. For example...”

Craib cleared his throat, ready to recite another spell.

“Allow me to use my will to move the object as I please.”

Just as before, the artglyphs appeared, and the stone floated into the air before coming to a stop.

“Wow!” Arcus’s excitement grew by the second.

“See? Remember that spells are something you can build yourself.”

“That was really impressive!” Arcus exclaimed.

In all the books he read in the man’s world, magic tended to be activated by very specific sets of words. The prospect of having absolute freedom to create your own spells made Arcus’s heart race. It spoke to the inborn human impulse to tinker.

“I gotta warn you now; we’re learning the absolute basics right now.”

“Yes, sir!”

Craib pulled out another book from his bag.

“This one’s all about your fundamentals. Make sure you read it, but promise me you won’t try and use any of it yet, ’kay?”

“Okay.”

At this point, trying to recreate anything would most likely lead to some sort of accident. Arcus could understand that, and he would hate to disappoint his uncle just because he was curious to try something out.

Craib continued to demonstrate different kinds of magic for Arcus.

“Uncle, I have a question,” Arcus piped up after a while.

“Shoot. Ask me anything you want.”

“Is there any way to know exactly how much aether you have to put into each spell?”

Since the necessary aether depended on the words or phrases you used, Arcus couldn’t help but wonder whether each word needed a set amount of magic when you used it in a spell. If there was a way to measure that beforehand, it would be invaluable.

He should be so lucky.

“Nope. You just gotta feel it.”

“Feel it?” Arcus echoed.

“Yup. It’s all about intuition.”

The vagueness of Craib’s response disappointed Arcus. He was sure there would be some way to accurately gauge how much aether each word called for, but it seemed that wasn’t the case.

“It’s impossible to say how much magic you gotta put into each word. You get why, right? You can’t see magic with your eyes, and it’s not a physical thing either, so it’s not like you can measure it.”

“But then how are you supposed to remember the right amounts for each spell?” Arcus objected.

“Like I said, you just gotta trust your gut. Also, you start by just trying out the

spell again and again, and eventually you'll work out how much power you need."

However, his answer still didn't satisfy Arcus.

"B-But if you have no specific amount to guide you, doesn't that just mean that you'll end up miscalculating the aether you need on each repeated attempt?"

"Miscalculating, huh? You sure know some fancy words." Craib smiled. "But yeah, you're right. That's why magic's all about training."

So there really wasn't a way to measure aether accurately. A part of Arcus suspected as much; after all, if such a method existed, his aether wouldn't have been tested by something as primitive as creating ripples on water.

Deep in thought, there was a slight pause before Arcus realized that Craib was studying him with an unreadable expression.

"Is something wrong?" he asked his uncle.

"I wouldn't say 'wrong,' but... Y'know, I noticed this yesterday too, but you really don't talk like a normal six-year-old. It's like you're too... fluent. Or too confident. I dunno."

"O-Oh, really?! That's just... It must be the result of my studies!" Arcus was under the impression that speaking more loudly would make his statement more convincing.

His fluent speech and speed at picking up new vocabulary was, of course, a result of what he'd learned through that man's memories. He always had to memorize new words when he was receiving his heir's education, but now he found it much easier to actually put them to use. Before he knew it, he was able to speak at length without even needing to pause for breath.

"Yeah... I guess that makes sense." There was a hint of pity in Craib's eyes. The next moment, he placed his large hands firmly on Arcus's shoulders. "Don't worry, Arcus. I ain't gonna let all that hard work of yours go to waste. We'll get you up to scratch on magic, I swear!"

"Oh, um... thank you." Arcus wasn't sure what else he could say under his

uncle's intense gaze.

Apparently, he had given Craib a false impression. It seemed he thought his family had forced him to study day and night.

Still, I'm very lucky to have a kindhearted uncle like him around.

Arcus genuinely thought so, especially when considering what the rest of his family was like. He found hope rising in his chest: hope that he would be able to master magic like he wanted to. So long as he didn't dwell on never knowing for sure how much power he would need.

Even though Craib was teaching Arcus magic now, it wasn't like he could be by his side at every hour of the day. Thanks to his scholarly and military work, and the fact that he held his own territory (small though it was), he was actually fairly busy most of the time. Instead of teaching him directly, he would give Arcus assignments to do at home before catching up with him in his spare moments.

Arcus worked hard on these assignments daily. Today, he was reading an old grimoire he had borrowed from Craib's library. He was chasing some hint of how someone might increase their aether. In the stories told in that man's world, magic power increased the more you used it, but that wasn't the case here. In this world, aether was set from the day you were born, and it wasn't thought that there was anything you could do about it.

Craib had once followed this same line of inquiry that Arcus now pursued and apparently found nothing of use, so Arcus didn't hold out much hope himself. Even then, he felt he had to check. With the knowledge from his dream, there might be something he would spot that Craib couldn't.

He wasn't having any luck. The book mentioned nothing on increasing your power, merely listing ways your power could manifest once you learned to control it, among other similarly unhelpful things. Not only that, but the last few sections of the book were so complex that not even Craib was able to understand them. For example, he had just come to a section about kneading one's magic. Craib had this to say about that section:

"Oh, yeah. I don't really have a clue about this part."

Craib himself had done as the book said, manipulating the magic inside his body and working hard to build it into something greater, but he never had any success with it. In the first place, he wasn't quite sure what the book meant by "knead."

"Knead? I mean, what the hell is that supposed to mean, right?" Craib had remarked.

It was a fair point. Were you supposed to push into your aether like clay? Or was it more of a folding action? In the man's world, there were machines for that sort of thing. Surely you wouldn't need something like that?

Arcus was having a hard time wrapping his head around the word.

"Perhaps I should just give it a try."

He wouldn't get anywhere just by thinking about it, after all. Just as Craib told him to, Arcus had been moving his aether around his body on a daily basis, splitting it up and putting it back together again; he was starting to get quite good at it. If kneading was just an extension of that, it wouldn't be a bad idea to try it out.

"Knead... knead... knead..."

Arcus focused, folding his power over itself, kneading and pressing into it over and over again. It was only after he had been at it for a few hours that he realized something.

"Is my power... decreasing?"

As he kneaded, it felt like his power was ebbing away, little by little. Just moving magic around inside your body shouldn't consume it, but Arcus was sure he had less now than when he started this exercise.

"I shall keep kneading," he decided.

Some sort of change was happening within him, which meant he was making progress. He continued to knead, hoping he might discover something new in the process. However...

"U-Uh-oh! I must have exerted myself a bit too much..."

Arcus kept going until it felt like there was barely any magic left inside him at

all. When he started, his magic was pleasantly warm—like freshly-drawn bathwater—but now it burned like steam. Not only that, but he felt more resistance as he tried to manipulate it now. It had been so easy at the start, but now the magic seemed to settle inside him like a boulder.

Arcus briefly considered casting a spell.

“No, I can’t do that... Especially not indoors.”

In its current state, his magic would likely need a forceful way out—and that risked a shockwave. Not only that, but this sensation was entirely new to him. If his inexperience led him to release it clumsily, he could end up destroying his entire bedroom.

Yet, if he didn’t release it now, that burning weight was just going to sit there until he did, or until it found its own way out. Arcus was starting to get nervous.

“I’ll work it out later.”

He decided he would leave the dangerous power he had created inside him. If he didn’t focus on it, he wouldn’t feel the burning. If he left it alone, it would probably cool down. He hoped so, at least.

He hoped, but he suspected it wouldn’t be that simple, either. People had researched magic for hundreds of years before he was born, but Arcus was just a six-year-old boy. It wasn’t like he was going to be able to discover anything new based on a passing whim. Increasing your own aether was one of the biggest roadblocks in magic research. Finding the solution wasn’t going to be easy.

Picking up the textbook, Arcus left his room. As he did so, he was unlucky enough to walk right into Joshua. He stiffened under his father’s icy glare. Ever since Craib started teaching Arcus magic, Joshua’s attitude toward him became colder by an order of magnitude. It seemed the tension between him and his brother was just as complicated as Arcus thought.

Joshua’s gaze dropped to the book in Arcus’s hands.

“Studying magic?”

“Yes.”

Joshua clicked his tongue.

“Studying shan’t get you the inheritance back,” he remarked irritably.

“I never wanted the inheritance,” Arcus replied.

“Nor does it matter how much you learn from my brother!” Joshua barked.
“Your magic levels will remain pitifully low!”

“Magic levels are not the be-all and end-all of a good magician,” Arcus informed him, remaining cool against the fire of Joshua’s anger.

The next moment, he felt a sharp pain across his face. Joshua had hit him. The next thing he knew, Arcus’s head slammed against the corridor wall, and the metallic taste of blood spread across his tongue. He must have cut his mouth.

“You are nothing but a nuisance!” Joshua spat, enraged.

His father no longer felt the sadness of a parent who had lost their son. If he had, he wouldn’t be able to treat the child who shared his blood so horrifically. Wrath was all that consumed him now.

For a while, Arcus stared at the floor in silence. Eventually, having lost interest, Joshua left him there. Arcus put his hand to his cheek and stood up. It was then that he noticed Lecia’s head poking around one corner of the corridor. Her eyes shone with anxiety. She must have seen the whole thing.

“B-Brother...”

“Lecia.”

Lecia checked if the coast was clear before racing up to Arcus.

“Are you okay, Brother?” she asked.

“I’m fine. This is nothing.” Arcus smiled reassuringly at her, but Lecia dropped her gaze to the floor.

“I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what?” Arcus asked.

“It’s ’cause of me that Mother and Father are being so mean to you and hitting you and stuff...” Lecia’s shoulders shook like she was about to burst into tears.

“Lecia, none of this is your fault.”

“Y-Yeah, it is, 'cause... 'cause I'm gonna be the heir instead of you! I stole it from you!”

It seemed Lecia was under the impression that this was her fault.

“No, Lecia,” Arcus told her. “It is my fault.”

“No it's not! It's not!” Lecia wailed, unable to hold her tears back any longer.

Arcus waited patiently for her to calm down. Eventually, her wails became a series of intermittent sobs.

“Brother... why can't everyone just get along like we used to? I wanna play with you.”

“I don't know, Lecia. But it would be nice.”

That was impossible now. Much as he agreed with Lecia that families should get along, Arcus's relationship with his parents was damaged beyond repair.

In the man's youth, his parents fought, and he had felt much the same way as Lecia probably did now. It was natural for children to want their parents to get along, and to treat their family with kindness.

It shouldn't have been too much to ask. But Lecia's wish would never come true, and it was all their parents' fault. It was their fault for not seeing their children's worth beyond their natural talents. It was their fault that Lecia was crying now.

It was enough to make Arcus's blood boil. Proving his parents wrong was no longer enough. Eventually, he would have to settle things properly. There was no other way to do that than to wipe the Raytheft name from the face of the earth.

“Brother?”

“There's no need to cry. I'll play with you, okay?” Arcus said.

“Really?”

“Of course.” Taking Lecia's hand, Arcus led her to his room.

After the two of them played for a while, Lecia spoke up.

“Is it okay if I come to your room sometimes?” she asked.

“As long as you’re careful Mother and Father don’t see you,” warned Arcus.

“Kay! I promise!” Lecia beamed at him.

That smile alone was enough to wipe away the pain from Joshua’s assault.

It had been two years since Craib started teaching Arcus magic.

Arcus was now eight years old. He had grown more than four extra inches (to borrow the unit from that man’s world) and was now of more or less average height for his world. That was all well and good, but there was just one problem.

“My face is far too feminine...” Arcus sighed glumly, rubbing at his cheeks as he studied himself in the mirror.

His features adamantly refused to surrender their baby fat. It wasn’t just his face, either—his unusual silvery hair also gave off a feminine impression. Logically, Arcus knew he was still only eight years old and that the situation would probably improve over time. That didn’t stop the uneasiness from bubbling up inside him every time he saw himself in the mirror.

There was still good news, however. His magical studies were coming along nicely. He had put countless hours into studying the artglyphs and the Elder Tongue and memorizing a fair bit of the characters and vocabulary. Arcus put a lot of his success down to the language skills that carried over from the man’s world.

Magic aside, its laws of nature and physics were very similar to his own. There were quite a few words and phrases that Arcus shouldn’t have been able to understand but was able to work out when he compared them to what he knew from the other world.

Electricity, obscurity, magnetism, nothingness... These were just a handful of the words that helped Arcus’s understanding. The words from that man’s country held nuances other languages lacked, which also worked to Arcus’s advantage. Arcus had been lucky that the man was such a bookworm.

According to Arcus's uncle, he was at the same level as a student of the Royal Institute of Magic. It wasn't normal for an eight-year-old to be this far ahead in his studies. Perhaps part of that came from Arcus's desire to win out over the elder Raythefts. That wasn't to say he disliked his studies, but the abuse his fall from grace still brought on him spurred him forward like little else.

Arcus still had a long way to go before he could get his revenge on Joshua. He had to keep going if he wanted any chance of being able to show up him and Celine and destroy the dated traditions of the Raytheft house.

As for the use of magic itself, Arcus had become quite good at it. He would practice with Craib in his garden whenever his uncle had time, and it was safe to say that he had more or less mastered the basics. It wasn't too long ago, on one of these occasions, that he chose to show his uncle what he had learned.

"Okay. Give it a try," Craib instructed.

"Yes, sir."

Under Craib's watchful eye, Arcus carefully portioned out the aether he needed for the words he had in mind.

"Turn the wrath within me to flame. Scorch the skies with your roar and incinerate all in your path as you become a burning arrow."

The moment the words fell from Arcus's lips, artglyphs began to float up around him. They slowly twisted themselves into a magic circle, and a spear of flame pierced through its center.

This was an offensive fire spell, *Flamlarune*. It was a version of the spell *Flamrune*, which Craib had created to be easier to use.

The spear of flames shot from the center of the circle, hitting its target and setting it ablaze. Once the flames burned out, they transformed into artglyphs before dissolving into the air.

"Nice! That was awesome!"

"Thank you," Arcus replied, bowing his head at Craib's praise.

It took Arcus a long time to work out how much aether and what kind he needed to put into that spell, but after practicing it over and over, he finally had

it down. There was still something that bothered him, though.

It's just far too inefficient.

It was the lack of numbers that gave Arcus the most trouble. Sure, he had gotten used to feeling out how much aether he needed, and according to Craib, that was the only way to do it. But no matter how many times he repeated that, Arcus found it difficult to accept. If he could only measure it, he would be able to use each spell as effectively as possible.

He felt a rough hand ruffling his hair. Arcus looked up at Craib curiously.

"I can't believe you're already using *Flamlarune*! And you're only eight! You know this'd mean you're war-ready, right?"

"R-Really?" Arcus asked.

"Yep! Wanna come join me on the front line next time?"

"If... If you think I'm ready..."

"I was just kiddin'!" Craib let out a roaring laugh.

"Ha... ha..." Arcus's lips twitched into a hesitant smile of their own.

He wasn't quite sure he approved of how casually Craib spoke of war, like he was inviting Arcus to a picnic.

It was true that this level of magic would likely qualify Arcus to fight out on the battlefield. Firearms did not exist here. Not only that, but nobles and royal heirs were often made to fight at a very young age, so you couldn't blame Arcus for not being able to tell whether Craib was joking or not.

I shall probably have to go eventually...

The situation in this world was much less stable compared to the world Arcus dreamed of. Nations scuffled with each other over the smallest of issues, and even lords who served the same king often squabbled. The situation could change overnight. As a citizen, you had to be ready for your country to go to war at all times.

Aside from spell practice, there was something else that Arcus worked on in Craib's garden with him. He was learning about the art of seals. With the right

tools, you could carve out a spell on an object to give it a magical effect. It was a very useful art; it filled many of the same niches as the other world's infrastructure and consumer electronics. You didn't need to cast a spell for those objects to work, so it was widely used by both magicians and non-magicians alike.

One popular use of seals was to create a Sol Glass, which was a piece of lighting equipment often placed in and around the home. You could also make objects that created fire, similar to lighters from the man's world. Seals could even be engraved on weapons, creating a special class of prohibitively expensive "Seal Arms."

Arcus started learning about seals not only to further his studies, but so that he could earn his own money. It was Craib who initially suggested the idea: Arcus would engrave seals and sell the finished work to wholesalers. The financial incentive would also help Arcus increase his skills; after all, since he was selling these items, he couldn't be lackadaisical about his technique. Still, at the moment, Arcus was only working on very small objects. At first, he couldn't engrave as neatly as he needed to, and his results were dubious to say the least. Thanks to his enduring practice, he had now become much better at it.

Taking up his carving tools, today Arcus was working on carving out a new set of artglyphs.

If I make this part more solid, it will also become more brittle... but I can't use the word "tenacity" here, either...

The reason Arcus hesitated was that there weren't many words he could use together with "tenacity," a word he had learned from his dream. Tenacity would imbue the object with both strength and firmness. Arcus could not think of a more effective choice, but the stronger the word, the larger the influence it had over the words it was combined with.

This was one of the trickier aspects of spellcraft. Powerful words had a strong influence over the other words in the spell, and if you didn't pay the utmost care and attention, your spell could end up having unintended effects. To optimize a spell, powerful words had to be tempered with words that limited their effect and bent them to the caster's will. Getting the balance perfect

required lots and lots of trial and error.

There were some related to fire which were very rarely used, since they were simply too overwhelming. Civilization had yet to discover any words related to lightning magic. Other words, like “annihilation” and “maelstrom,” could drain away the caster’s life and create disasters on a scale that threatened nations.

Arcus kept engraving away until he realized he was out of materials.

“Ah. I must have used it all up already.”

To engrave seals, you needed a small knife and a substance called Sorcerer’s Silver. It was created by infusing silver with specially cultivated aether and had very similar properties to mercury. Mixing it with pigment and metal powder and applying it to the tip of your blade as you carved was what gave the seals their effects. Without the Sorcerer’s Silver, you were merely drawing useless shapes into an object.

“Time to visit the shops.”

Putting his project on hold, Arcus made preparations to go out.

It was common knowledge that letting children of the gentry—especially very young ones—wander outdoors was a bad idea, but nobody said a word when Arcus walked straight out of the Raytheft estate.

Now and again he ran into Joshua when he went out. He would usually just glare at Arcus and otherwise leave him alone. Apparently, he thought Arcus was fixated on ignoring him.

Arcus resided in the kingdom of Lainur, an absolute monarchy positioned right in the middle of a large continent. Its achievements in the aetheric arts outstripped its neighbors, and the capital prided itself on its Magician’s Guild, which protected the rights and social status of magicians, as well as the Royal Institute of Magic, which oversaw magical education within the country.

Thanks to its culture of supremacy through magic, Lainur hung on despite its small size and the military might of the Gillis Empire in the northwest. The way the capital itself had evolved was impressive, too. Not nearly as impressive as the cities in the man’s world, but the roads were paved with stone, and most of

the brick-and-stone buildings were three or four stories high. Their roofs, too, were a sight to behold for their eclectic colors. Sol Glasses were set outside the storefronts along the main street, illuminating the city even at night.

Leaving the noble district behind, Arcus set out for the main street, his bag swinging from his shoulder. Crowds bustled around the city, another sign of the kingdom's effective governance. Personally, Arcus rather liked the idea of the governments he had learned about from the man's world, but he couldn't deny that a monarchy like this one kept the country stable.

The street was lined with inns, private general stores, chain stores, and arms dealers, just as described in the books from the man's world. Since the road was so wide, there was space for the stalls hawking street food scattered about. There was a bookstore, too, which sold everything from novels and technical books to magic magazines, textbooks, and spellbooks. There was as much variety among the most popular magic magazines as fashion magazines, and they were a common purchase among magicians and apprentices alike. It didn't seem to be selling anything of use to Arcus.

As he peered into the store, he spotted a man in a cloak staring at the books and muttering to himself. His face had the gaunt cast of a man denied too much sleep, and he reminded Arcus of the students from the man's world, who would stay up studying until dawn the night before an important exam. He was staring so intensely at the books that Arcus was surprised they hadn't caught on fire yet. He must have been a student at the Royal Institute.

While government positions like military or public office were typically reserved for nobles. Positions that required an aptitude for magic were a different matter, and so even civilians were hired into these roles out of necessity.

This was partly why Lainur's education system was built on earning qualifications. There were two exams a magician could take. One was the Guild's Certificate of Sorcery Education, and the other was the National Diploma of Sorcery. Either of these was required for a sorcery-related job in Lainur. The man perusing the books was likely studying to pass one of these exams.

Arcus heard that the National Diploma of Sorcery was particularly challenging. It had been twenty years since these two exams came into existence, and while more than a hundred people passed the Guild's exam annually, the national exam had only eleven successful examinees to date, which spoke volumes about its difficulty.

The bookstore wasn't what Arcus was after. Leaving it behind, he headed toward his true goal, thoughts about his future with those exams lingering. It wasn't long before he arrived at his destination: a large store which he was already very familiar with. His first time here was with Craib, who introduced him to the owner and some of the clerks. Now when he came alone, they welcomed him like any other customer, despite his age.

"Hello?" Arcus announced his arrival as he pushed open the door.

He was immediately greeted by a smiling clerk, and one he had met before: a short, stout man with slitted eyes.

"Ah, Arcus! Welcome! What can I help you with today?"

"I've come to purchase some Sorcerer's Silver," Arcus replied.

"Sorcerer's Silver, is it? I will get you some immediately."

"Oh! And I would like some green pigment too, if you wouldn't mind."

"Of course," said the clerk, asking one of his colleagues to procure the goods.

Color choice was an important factor when engraving a spell, and each spell had a different compatibility with different colors. Gold, cinnabar, copper, and especially royal blue were among the most expensive and correspondingly were said to have a stronger effect on the engraved spell.

It wasn't long until the clerk returned with Arcus's items.

"Here you are: Sorcerer's Silver and green pigment. Will that be all today?"

"Yes, please," replied Arcus.

Taking Arcus's payment with a smile, the clerk thanked him cheerfully for his patronage.

Arcus wandered the city a while longer but eventually decided to call it a day. Just as he was about to make his way home...

“Stop it! Stay away from me!”

It sounded like a young girl, and one in trouble, judging by her tone of voice. Arcus searched the area for the source, leading him to a backstreet.

Should I go and get a guard? Arcus thought to himself. It might just have been a scuffle between children. Shrieking children weren't hard to come by in the plaza. Backstreets, however, were a different matter...

Although I'm just a child myself.

If Arcus didn't share that man's memories, he probably wouldn't be making such a big deal of this situation. In the end, he decided to step into the backstreet and find out what was going on. He was confident he could fall back on his magic to defend himself, even from an adult.

It was just as he was investigating the street that a girl dashed from the entrance to an alleyway right next to him. He found himself gasping in surprise as the girl let out a small shriek. He stumbled backward, only just avoiding her crashing into him. Though the girl lost her balance, she killed her momentum by spinning around on the spot before righting herself. Arcus was impressed with her agility.

She looked to be around the same age as Arcus. She had long black hair that flowed down the back of her white cloak, a pretty face, and deep-blue eyes.

Arcus could hear the whispers of men coming from behind her. He strained his ears to listen.

“Where did she go?”

“This way! Come on!”

It didn't take a genius to figure out that the girl was being chased.

“H-Hey, I'm... I mean...” The girl spoke up, but she was having trouble forming a coherent sentence. Arcus assumed she was trying to ask for help.

“This way!”

He wasted no time in grabbing her arm and pulled her back into the alleyway. Peering around the corner, two shabby-looking men eventually came into view.



The men picked the street over for a trace of the girl, but after a while, they gave up and started to head in a different direction. The girl let out a sigh of relief.

“Thanks. You saved me.”

“You’re very welcome. May I ask who those men were?” Arcus replied.

“I’m not sure. I was just walking along when they surrounded me... and when I ran away, they chased after me. Even when I ran into the alleyway, they were right behind me! You’d think they’d give up sooner than that!” The girl became more and more animated as she recited her tale.

“They sound like kidnappers or something to me,” Arcus remarked.

“Uh-huh. Probably.”

“We should take this opportunity to return to—”

“Hold on.” The girl interrupted Arcus mid-sentence. He looked up at her to see she’d pressed her finger to his lips.

Arcus fell silent, careful to keep his breathing quiet. He heard footsteps. It seemed the girl had a good pair of ears on her.

“This way,” the girl whispered, pointing deeper down the alleyway.

The two of them walked heel-toe further down the alley. Following the dimly lit path, they made for an adjoining alleyway. The footsteps of their pursuers grew steadily louder. The pair continued in search of a way out of the labyrinth of backstreets.

“A dead end!” the girl gasped. “What do we do now?”

They were surrounded on three sides by high stone walls. The only way out was to turn around. Perhaps pulling the girl back into the alleyway was a mistake.

“Sorry. This is my fault,” Arcus admitted.

“That’s not true,” objected the girl.

The two of them didn’t have the time to work out their next step before one of the men appeared. He wasn’t one of the two in shabby clothing they had

seen before. He wore a dark brown cloak, and there was an air of exhaustion around him. In terms of looks... it would probably be nicer not to say anything at all.

The girl took a step forward, a determined glint in her eye.

“How did you know we were here?” she demanded.

“Just kept lookin’ till I found ya, didn’t I?” The man let out an unpleasant, screechy laugh.

He had found them unusually quickly, regardless of the kidnappers’ numbers. It would take unnatural endurance to cover the ground he had in so little time. In other words...

“You’re a magician,” the girl stated.

“Yeah. Y’know, ya coulda done me a favor and not bothered with all that runnin’ about,” the man grumbled.

“This isn’t how you’re supposed to treat children, you know!” the girl informed him. “Why are you chasing me?”

“Just lookin’ to make some cash. With a pretty and intelligent face like yours, I reckon you’d be worth a pretty penny.”

“How dare you!”

“Whatever. Money makes the world go round, y’know. I don’t care what ya think of me, ’slong as I get my cash.” This time, the man set his sights on Arcus, letting out another vulgar laugh. “Ooh, this one’s got a nice face, too! Friend of yours? He’ll make me rich, too. And quick!”

The situation was escalating quickly. Although Arcus was confident in his magic skills, he had never used them in actual combat. Not only that, but he had to protect and create a way out for this girl as well as himself. If he hadn’t been up against a magician, he might have stood a chance. Arcus’s mind whirred, trying to think of a way to get out of this situation. If only he hadn’t pulled the girl into this alleyway.

Magic-users were rare—he had hoped to catch his opponent off guard with a spell or two, but that was a mistake. Now he’d pay for it.

Why did he try to play the hero? He should have just gone to get a guard like he originally planned—a guard, or at the very least an adult. But no amount of regret was going to extract them from this situation.

It was then that Arcus noticed the kidnapper was making no attempt to close the gap. Arcus briefly wondered whether he was planning to use a spell to capture them, but he hadn't yet made any move.

"Now, how should I do this..." the man wondered aloud. He hadn't even chosen a spell. Perhaps he wasn't taking this so seriously after all.

At the very least, he didn't seem to think Arcus and the girl would be able to fight back. Maybe they could use that to their advantage.

I'll wait for him to open his mouth... Arcus decided.

It was at that very moment that the man parted his lips to speak an incantation.

"I know! May my power take the form of a rope and punish thee! Moreover —"

The man began to recite his spell. At the same time, Arcus opened his mouth to chant an incantation of his own.

"May my burning tongue incinerate the darkness. Turn my screams of despair into winds of calamitous change. Set forth, and permeate the sky."

But it wasn't Arcus's spell. It was the girl's. Both Arcus and the kidnapper were taken by surprise, and the kidnapper hadn't even managed to finish his own spell yet. He stopped his long incantation and made to cast a different spell, but the girl's magic was already cast.

Artglyphs as orange as the scorching sun rose up in a magic circle as flames burned in the middle. Those flames burst forth, twisting and turning in the air, before diving straight toward the kidnapper.

Arcus watched in awe; this looked like it was a spell of the girl's own making. Craib mentioned before that there were no children of Arcus's age who were capable of creating their own spells, but it seemed every rule had its exception.

The kidnapper just barely finished his defensive spell, but because he had

rushed, its most important clause was cut short, and the bubble of magic surrounding him now was thin and brittle. Arcus looked on. At first glance, it seemed the girl had the advantage.

Wait... her spell isn't going to work!

Just as Arcus thought, the flames scattered against the kidnapper's defensive bubble. It was clear the girl had not expected this development.

"How did that not work?!" she gasped.

"Well I wasn't expectin' that!" the man exclaimed with a piercing laugh. "Y'know, I thought your spell didn't sound familiar. I didn't know kids these days could make their own little magic tricks!"

"Why didn't it work?" the girl asked herself, still completely perplexed.

"You chose the wrong expression." Arcus stepped in with the answer.

"What?"

"Your spell contained the phrase 'incinerate the darkness,'" Arcus explained. "Darkness. In other words, night. But it's the middle of the day. Spells inimical to darkness won't be nearly as effective right now."

"R-Really?" the girl asked, staring at him.

Arcus nodded. Beside them, the kidnapper let out an intrigued hum.

"Ya know your stuff, kid. But yeah, that's right. Ya must be educated. Ya don't see silver hair like that much 'round here, neither." The kidnapper began to approach the children, who stepped backward.

There was nowhere to run. The three walls of this dead end belonged to three-and four-story buildings. There was no spell in either of their repertoires that would let them clear such a height. Though the girl cast spell after spell to fend off the kidnapper, he blocked every single one. It did seem to be getting on his nerves, at least.

"Hmph! I was hopin' not to damage the goods, to be honest. But whatever. If I end up disfigurin' ya, least I can patch ya up with magic later. Now..."

"Wait! We're just kids!" the girl protested. "Aren't adults supposed to look

out for children?!”

Arcus couldn't tell whether this was all bluster or not, but she followed up her proclamation by sticking her tongue out at the kidnapper.

“Quiet!” Despite his words, he still didn't seem to see the two of them as a threat.

After the girl's attacks, he probably felt he knew the extent of their power now. He didn't seem particularly impressed. Suddenly, the girl lowered her voice.

“Guess I have no choice...”

She was no longer speaking like a child. Now her tone was cold, cruel, and composed. She had cast off her sweet persona and was now playing a different game.

“I'd cover my ears if I were you,” she warned Arcus.

“What?”

Instead of answering, the girl pulled out a dagger from under her cloak, likely so that she could fend off an attack mid-chant. Arcus could already feel the tremendous excess aether rolling off her in waves. It was enough to give Lecia a run for her money, if not even more than that.

The kidnapper's face was quickly draining of color. It seemed he had noticed too.

“May the echo of these footsteps ignite the firmament. O, dazzling skies...”

“O-O, ruler of chains, may you leave these evildoers gasping for air and freeze...”

The two of them began to chant at the same time, completely focused on each other. This was Arcus's chance.

“A greedy man longs to possess as much as he can without discretion. He is hungry even for the specks of dust on the ground. Take this unprejudiced right arm and receive all that it holds.”

“Huh?!”

“What?”

Thinking quickly, Arcus recited his own, shorter spell before the other two could finish theirs.

He raised his right arm above his head. The next moment, artglyphs began to snake around it, pulling in a flood of trash from the alleyway indiscriminately toward them.



Debris, trash, broken plant pots...

Almost immediately, Arcus's arm was sheathed in junk.

"Whoa!" Instead of finishing her incantation, the girl let out a gasp.

It wasn't long until Arcus was ready to launch.

"Scrapped Arms!"

"What the...!"

Arcus swung his giant junk-covered arm down. The kidnapper just laughed at him.

"Ya stupid or somethin'? Ya ain't gonna hit me from all the way over there!"

"In that case, I'll have to launch a *Rocket Punch*!"

At that very moment, the junk around Arcus's arm launched at the kidnapper with the same speed and force as Arcus's first attack.

"What?! No—"

Caught completely off guard, he had no time to chant a defense. The impromptu missile came apart; its component junk clattered and crashed against the kidnapper, burying him in a pile of garbage.

They had done it. Arcus let out a sigh of relief; suddenly, the girl spoke up. Hurriedly, he tried to stop her.

"We did— Huh?!"

"Don't say that yet! You'll jinx it!" he gasped.

A jinx. Arcus should have known more than anybody just how powerful words could be. He managed to stop her, but not before most of the "spell" was already out of her mouth. The two of them stopped still, holding their breath. But it didn't look like the kidnapper was going to be moving any time soon. Satisfied, Arcus moved his hand away from her mouth.

"What was that for?!" she demanded.

"Listen. *Any* sort of victory cry after a battle will make the enemy stand right back up again!" Arcus explained.

“What sort of magic is that?” she asked.

“It’s not magic.”

Arcus knew it was all just superstition that he had picked up from the man’s memories, but even then he didn’t want to risk anything.

“Wait a second!” the girl spoke up, as if suddenly remembering something.

“Right,” Arcus agreed, knowing just what she was about to say.

This wasn’t the time for idle chit chat. They had to make sure that the kidnapper was really down. Apparently, Arcus had misjudged the girl’s thoughts; the next second, she was throwing herself at him.

“That spell you cast just now! You know, with all the junk flying to your arm? What was that?! Tell me! C’mon, tell me!”

Arcus stayed silent.

“What’s wrong? Come on! I wanna know! Tell me! Tell me, tell me, tell me!” The girl continued to badger him about his *Scrapped Arms*, either oblivious or indifferent to his uncomfortable expression.

“I think we have bigger things to worry about than that right now,” he finally said.

“Huh? Why?” She really didn’t seem to have a clue.

“We need to make sure that magician isn’t just playing dead,” Arcus explained.

There was a pause.

“Oh!” The girl let out a belated gasp of realization. Had Arcus’s spell really impressed her so much that she lost all semblance of common sense? Or maybe she just *really* liked magic. That was probably it.

Once she calmed down, Arcus gave a gentle, experimental kick to the man lying beneath the rubble. There was no movement.

“Are we good?” the girl asked.

“I think so. It would probably be wise to hit him with a binding spell, though.” Arcus glanced back at the girl.

That was all it took. The next second, he found his body being lifted into the air. Arcus could still move his neck to see what had happened; there was the kidnapper, dirtied from the trash. He had his arms around Arcus and was lifting him up from behind.

“Weren’t expectin’ this, huh?” He screeched with glee.

“You rotten—” But the kidnapper put a hand to Arcus’s mouth.

“Uh-uh! I can’t have ya castin’ spells now. Even if you’re just kids, your magic’s kinda too powerful, y’know?”

Arcus writhed, kicking his legs with all the strength he could muster. He was just a kid; there was no way he was going to be able to leave a scratch on a fully-grown adult. The kidnapper didn’t even flinch.

“You guys are a real pain, ya know that? Ugh. I wish I had a better assignment for my first job. I shoulda been more careful...” the man muttered to himself.

Suddenly, the girl cried out.

“Let go of him!”

“Not happenin’. And don’t get any funny ideas, neither. Any magic ya cast could hit him, y’know.”

He was right. Not only that, but there was nothing stopping the kidnapper from launching his own magical attack. They were backed up right into a corner. Arcus tried to think. What could he do? If he couldn’t speak, he couldn’t use magic. Should he leave things to the girl to sort out? But what if she messed up?

Think! Think! Think!

There had to be something. Something he could do. He went through the contents of his bag in his head. His wallet. The Sorcerer’s Silver. The pigment. Nothing that could help him now. What else did he have?

Aether. He still had some left inside him. And it wasn’t just any aether: it was the hot, burning aether from when he practiced kneading. He had held it inside him ever since. Aether was released as waves; if he let it out now, he might be able to make a breakthrough.

He had nothing to lose.

Arcus pushed out his aether with all the force he could muster.

The hot waves that burst out of him were much more powerful than he had expected, like the moment a balloon bursts from being overinflated. It briefly crossed his mind that he wouldn't come out of this unscathed.

Arcus cried out as he felt himself being launched through the air like a rocket. His kidnapper had been at the opposing end of that explosive force.

He too screamed as he was thrown violently back in the opposite direction.

Arcus managed to get to his feet as he groaned from the pain. Though battered and bruised, he had gotten himself out of danger. He studied the man, but it looked like he really was down for the count now. He was twitching and convulsing but otherwise completely unconscious. The girl, astonishment still written on her face, opened her mouth to speak.

"Was that like... a huge fart or something?" she asked.

"No!" Arcus snapped. "That was aether!"

The fact that the man was thrown back from behind him *may* have made it look like that, but he still felt it was rude for her to point it out. The girl didn't seem to notice his irritation as she kept asking questions.

"But aether doesn't come out that forcefully!"

"Neither do farts!"

"What? Sure they—"

"No, they don't! And I'd thank you to stop making such embarrassing assertions!"

Once the pair calmed down from their quarrel, they tied the man up before handing him over to one of the guards who patrolled the capital. Apparently, the other men who had been working with him were also apprehended. Questioned about their activities in the backstreets, it wasn't long until they were arrested.

Arcus and the girl made their way out of the backstreets and toward the city's central plaza. "Central" was a misnomer; the plaza was a little to the southeast of the castle at the city's true center.

Roads split off from the plaza to the east, west, and south, meaning that if you wanted to go anywhere in the capital, you would invariably pass this plaza on your way. The ground was paved with a level layer of stone, and a flower clock in the center painted the area with color. Stalls were dotted around, filling the air with lively voices. Street performers and artists took up position in the most conspicuous spots, drawing in crowds of commoners and low-ranking nobles who sought entertainment.

It reminded Arcus of the scenes from medieval Europe he had seen in his dream—noblewomen in dresses carrying parasols, and boys in quilted jackets adorned with lace. He admired just how much attention to detail was paid to the clothing in that world.

Although he would have expected otherwise, in this world, the same kind of ostentatious coats, jackets, blouses, and scarves were also popular. In terms of fashion, there wasn't much of a gap between the two worlds. Whether noble or commoner, women would wear scarves, and noble boys would wear long, formal jackets.

At first glance, this world didn't seem very technologically advanced. However, when you took a closer look at the production of glass, spinning of textiles, and construction of buildings, there were many technologies in use that simply didn't exist in the man's world. The difference between the worlds in civilization's evolution was likely due to the existence of magic and seals and the highly-advanced civilization that occupied this world hundreds of years ago.

Arcus and the girl sat down by a flower bed on the edge of the plaza. After they had their breath back, the girl spoke.

"Thanks again. My name's Sue."

"You're very welcome. I'm Arcus Raytheft."

Sue frowned thoughtfully. The frown became a quizzical gaze.

"The Raythefts are nobles, right?"

"Well... Yes, they are."

"Huh. So you come from good stock."

She continued to study him, her curiosity piqued.

“Stop prodding me.”

“But your cheeks are all squishy and soft!”

Not content just with poking them, Sue went on to pinch them. Sure, they were probably soft, but so were any eight-year-old's. Arcus waited patiently for her to stop.

“Oh!” Sue exclaimed. “You're a noble, right? Are you gonna set the guards on me for playing with your face?”

“Of course not.”

“No? How about asking me to pay with my body?”

What on earth was she talking about?

“Do you know what that means?” Arcus asked.

“Course I do! It means you get like, one of my organs or an arm or something, right?”

“The organ trade is not something that should be taken lightly.” Arcus was beginning to get concerned. “Anyway, although I may be of noble blood, you may treat me as you would anyone else.”

“You sure?” Sue asked. She grabbed his hand to shake it. “In that case, it's nice to meet you!”

Arcus couldn't tell if it made him embarrassed or just shy. He didn't really have any friends at the moment, and it was unusual for him to meet children his own age.

At the same time, he couldn't help but wonder who exactly this girl was. Even if she hadn't given a surname, it was entirely possible that she came from a wealthy background, especially given her appearance. Her long black hair was well-combed, and her skin was completely free of dirt. She even wore jewelry, although it was subtly placed. The thick cloak she wore was of the tailor-made cut typical of aristocratic children, unlike the more common cloaks, which were fastened at the neck. The former were usually given to help disguise a child's social position when afield.

If Sue wasn't a noble child, then she could have belonged to a merchant family. In fact, it might have been Arcus who should be treating her more respectfully. In any case, what concerned Arcus the most was what a child of her status was doing wandering the capital by herself.

"Anyway! You gotta tell me about that magic now! I've never seen anything like it!" Sue leaned forward excitedly.

"That was a spell I created," Arcus replied.

"You can do that?! Wowie!"

"It's nothing, really..."

"Yes it is!" Sue objected. "I tried to make my own too, but you saw how they ended up, right?! And you knew straight away why they didn't work! You must be really smart!"

The more she praised him, the more embarrassed Arcus felt himself become. Although he didn't have room to say it, the final spell that *she* tried to cast sounded to him like it was going to be quite something.

"Y'know, you don't see a lotta spells like that. Usually if you wanna attack, you use water, wind, or fire... Natural stuff like that."

She was absolutely right. Fire, water, wind, stone... those were the sorts of elements used for offensive spells the majority of the time. It was probably thanks to inspiration from natural disasters that gave people the impression that they were so strong, and therefore the first candidates when creating these kinds of spells. Other kinds of destructive phenomena were not as widely known, and many people lacked the vocabulary to incorporate them into their magic.

It was thanks to Arcus's extra memories that he was able to picture and describe exactly what he wanted his spell to do.

"What did you picture to have all that trash fly to your arm?" the girl asked.

"I suppose I was thinking of people who collect waste," Arcus replied. "I mean, trash can be really heavy, right? And probably heavy enough to kill someone, even without needing to create fire or water. Although the kidnapper

survived in the end.”

“There probably wasn’t enough trash for that in those streets. But your thought process is super interesting.” Sue tilted her head thoughtfully, taking in his words. “Was there anything else?”

“Well...” Arcus began.

The two of them continued to discuss magic. Before they knew it, the sun had already set.

Although many days passed after the attempted kidnapping, Arcus continued to meet with Sue from time to time. The two of them had become friends. It wasn’t just her personality that made her easy to get along with; they had a lot in common. They were both at the same place with their magic skills, what with Sue already starting to create her own spells, so conversation came very naturally. Not only that, but her interest in magic covered a lot of ground that Arcus’s didn’t. They had already arranged to study together the next time they were both free.

She certainly is a strange girl... not that I have any right to talk, Arcus thought to himself.

Most children her age spent their free time playing outside, but she seemed to be studying every waking moment. While studying magic was more enjoyable than other kinds of work, since you could actually see your skills improving, it was still a little strange.

Arcus was reminded of a proverb from the man’s world: *“Birds of a feather flock together.”*

In any case, he was very pleased to have a friend who shared his passion for studying. Having a friend who could help you improve your own skills while you helped them was quite rare indeed. Although Arcus would have appreciated it if she stopped prodding and pinching his cheeks and calling him baby faced.

Today, Arcus was busy carving seals in his room. He had everything he needed: a bottle of Sorcerer’s Silver, a case of pigment, and his notebook filled with artglyphs. He had learned that if you carved using the hot, kneaded aether

he was now able to produce, your seal would be even more effective. Ever since that incident with the kidnapper, he kept an emergency reserve of that tempered aether and had even practiced controlling it. On a whim, he decided to use it when making a seal, and the results were impressive.

This kind of aether required much more careful handling than the regular kind, as well as a great deal of focus, but it was all worth it for its effectiveness. In fact, using it for seals made Arcus realize that his original way of carving probably hadn't been terribly efficient in drawing out the spell's full effects.

It was a new discovery, and one made by him alone.

Although there may be someone who discovered this before me, he thought.

Although he had struggled with seals before, all those struggles had led up to this discovery. That knowledge made Arcus feel all warm inside. He continued to carve as a cheerful song played inside his heart.

"Brother!"

"Ack!"

He hadn't noticed his visitor until she was standing right behind him. The shock caused him to lose focus and the careful control of his aether. He struggled to keep his grip on the dagger in his hand, but it was at the cost of his Sorcerer's Silver bursting out of its bottle.

It splattered over the floor, the drops sparkling and catching the light. Flustered, Lecia began to gather it all up.

"I-I'm sorry!"

"Don't worry about it. It's fine."

"I didn't think I'd scare you..."

"R-Right. Most people wouldn't." Arcus let out an awkward laugh.

He felt bad that she was apologizing, given that he was the one who should have had his guard up.

Having collected up the Sorcerer's Silver, Lecia sat down next to Arcus to watch him work. In the past two years she'd overcome her lisp, and now she

was perfectly capable of a fluent conversation.

Proper speech was essential to a magician, since you wouldn't be able to properly enunciate spells otherwise. Not only that, but poor language acquisition in your mother tongue would lead to problems when learning artglyphs and the Elder Tongue. As the heir to a noble military family, Lecia must have received rigorous speech therapy.

Lately, she had taken to tying up her silver hair with a blue ribbon. The hair that fell around her face was long, and her eyes were tired. She was just a little shorter than Arcus. Beneath her white blouse, she wore a frilly blue skirt, as well as suspenders to hold up her socks. Lecia peered at Arcus's handicraft curiously.

"You're making seals again today?" she asked.

"That's right."

"You must have worked very hard to be able to carve seals like that."

"Have you done any yet?" Arcus asked.

"Not yet. I've only just started learning magic, after all."

Lecia's magical education had been delayed, likely until she was judged properly able to handle it. Arcus had jumped the gun a bit. Most people didn't start to study magic until the age of twelve at the earliest, and some didn't start until fourteen.

"Have you learned any spells yet?" he asked.

"No, not yet."

That didn't surprise Arcus, either. It had taken more than six months for Craib to give him permission to start casting spells himself. Lecia would probably need around the same amount of time.

"What about you? I'm sure you've used magic several times by now," Lecia said.

"Yes, although they've mostly been basic spells. Uncle taught me *Flamlarune*, too, and I've learned how to cast that properly."

“Really? That’s amazing!” Lecia looked up at Arcus, her eyes sparkling with admiration.

“I’m sure you’ll learn it soon yourself. You won’t have any trouble with it.”

“I’ll do my best!” Lecia promised as she beamed at her brother.

At first, Arcus worried that Joshua and Celine would turn Lecia against him, but she had continued to come and see him over the years, and he found her presence incredibly comforting. If it weren’t for her, who knew just how deep he would have sunk into self-pity.

Arcus explained what he was doing to her as he carved, but eventually her break time was over, and she had to return to her classes. Arcus decided it was time for him to take a break, too. He gathered his aether, ready to tidy up, but then he stopped.

Unless he was mistaken, one of the drops of Sorcerer’s Silver on the ground just moved. Arcus let go of the aether he gathered inside him. The spot of liquid on the ground shrunk again, as though it had been expanded a moment before.

Intrigued, Arcus centered his aether again. Sure enough, the drop expanded. It was very odd. Even though he was putting his aether to use, it wasn’t like he was trying to do anything with the Sorcerer’s Silver.

“Perhaps it’s reacting to my aether,” he wondered aloud.

It was the only explanation he could think of. What he couldn’t work out was *why*. He had never seen Sorcerer’s Silver behave like this, and so he concluded that it must have had something to do with the aether he released when Lecia made him jump. Following that line of logic, it was probably connected to the moment the Silver shot from its bottle. But if that was true, Arcus couldn’t work out what about the incident would cause this phenomenon.

“I wasn’t using it to cast spells, only to carve out seals,” he murmured. “So something must have happened to it the moment it exploded...”

It was then that he remembered the hot, tempered aether inside him.

That had to be it. When Lecia scared him, he lost control of that aether, meaning the Sorcerer’s Silver would have been exposed to it. There was no

other explanation. While the Silver would have been exposed even as he carved out the seals, that exposure would have been very limited. Not like the intense burst he released when the Silver exploded.

Imbued with that aether, the Sorcerer's Silver had transformed into something else.

"It's awfully curious for it to change size like this..." Arcus said.

Now that he had worked out what had happened, he now had to figure out what to do with this new material. Tentatively, Arcus released some aether. As though reacting to it, the former Sorcerer's Silver began to grow in size once more. Arcus stopped. The liquid shrank back to its former size. He repeated this exercise over and over for a while, until suddenly it came to him like a bolt of lightning.

"That's it! A thermometer!" Arcus began to tremble with excitement at his discovery. "This is just like a thermometer!"

Watching the Sorcerer's Silver expand before him as it reacted to his aether reminded Arcus of mercury thermometers. Suppose he contained the Silver within glass—it would let him measure his aether expenditure accurately. He would no longer have to rely on his gut, and he would be able to fine-tune the effectiveness of his magic in no time.

Here was a possible solution to his eternal bugbear as a student of the aetheric arts. That night, Arcus stayed up researching Sorcerer's Silver and its transformation until dawn. His research confirmed his hypothesis: by exposing Sorcerer's Silver to hot aether, it became aetherically reactive. By all accounts, creating a device to measure magic power (which Arcus dubbed an aethometer) should work.

That morning, Arcus headed straight for Craib's place as soon as he deemed it prudent. He informed the guard at the gate that it was an urgent matter. The guard went to fetch him immediately.

Craib was still yawning as he welcomed Arcus into the reception room. Arcus's arrival must have woken him up. He was clad in a black tank top and long pants, presumably what he wore to bed. Arcus gave a slight, apologetic bow.

“Good morning, Uncle,” he began. “I apologize for imposing on you so early in the morning.”

“Early is right!” Craib studied him. “Hey, are those bags under your eyes?”

“I was working late into the night,” Arcus admitted bashfully.

Craib let out an exasperated sigh.

“Y’know that sleepin’ properly is important for kids, right? If you don’t sleep right, you’ll be stuck with that baby face and puny height until your fifties at least!” Craib teased, prodding at Arcus’s forehead with a thick finger. He clearly knew where to hit Arcus right where it hurt. “So, what’re you here for? You didn’t get kicked out or anythin’, right?”

Craib’s expression suddenly turned dark. Arcus had a feeling that Joshua wouldn’t be in for a good time if that were the case.

“No, that’s not it,” Arcus reassured him.

“Just be careful, okay? I think he really hates you, y’know. He might be too worried about his reputation to throw you out right now, but push him much further and he might snap.”

Craib was right. His brother detested Arcus, and while he and Celine hadn’t thrown him out just yet, the threat they posed to him if he rocked the boat was more palpable now that he was older. Arcus decided to keep his uncle’s warning in mind.

“I shall be careful,” he promised.

“Good. But just come straight here if it ever does happen, yeah? I’ll give you a good home!”

“Thank you!”

Arcus felt a renewed appreciation for his uncle’s kindheartedness.

“No problem! Say, you could bring some of your friends, too! The more the merrier!”

Arcus straightened up, deciding that now was the time to broach the main subject.

"I come here today with an earnest request," he began.

"Whaddya want?" Craib asked. "Cash?"

"No, although what I am thinking of may require some funding."

"Oh yeah?"

"I was just wondering whether you would be able to make something like this."

Arcus pulled a piece of paper out of his bag. On it, he had drawn all the necessary components for his aethometer, with a written explanation of each piece's function. Taking the sheet of paper from him, Craib studied it closely.

"So you want a glass tube and a graduated wooden frame? What's this for?"

"I suppose you would call it an experiment. Do you think you could make those for me?"

Arcus had no choice but to ask Craib; he didn't know anybody else who would be able (or willing) to help him. He had never made anything like this before. He decided to keep *what* he was trying to make a secret from his uncle, of course.

"Yeah, I could do that. You just want the stuff that's written on this paper, and a few of each, right?" Craib asked.

"That's right!"

"Sure thing. Looking at this, though, it'll probably take a while. Is that okay?"

"That's fine. Thank you so much!"

It wasn't long until the requested items arrived at the Raytheft estate. As for the Sorcerer's Silver, Arcus took care of that himself. The first step was to create a vacuum on the inside of the glass tubes with an appropriate spell before filling it with the Silver, just like a regular thermometer.

The problem is that it will react to my aether...

If Arcus released any aether too close to the Silver, it would expand and only make things more difficult. He found himself wishing the man had done some research into how thermometers were made. He scoured through the man's

memories buried in his head, but there was nothing about the particulars of thermometer production.

There was nothing that Arcus could do about that now, either, and so he resorted to trial and error. Eventually, he managed to get the Sorcerer's Silver inside the tube. The only thing left was to see whether the Silver still reacted through the glass.

"Come on..." Arcus murmured under his breath, releasing his aether.

He waited. And then...

The Silver moved.

"I... I did it!"

Overcome with excitement, Arcus slumped to the ground. His first prototype of the aethometer was a success. From that, he would be able to calculate how much aether different words and phrases required for different spells.

"I did it!" he cried out again. This one discovery would enable a giant leap forward in his studies.

Arcus danced around the room joyfully, unable to contain himself. He only made the discovery by complete coincidence, and yet he was able to use it to his advantage. The joy he felt was completely indescribable. Within two years of being disowned, he already made his first step toward showing up Joshua and Celine. They called him talentless, but with this one invention, his potential was limitless.

He was getting ahead of himself. First he had to tell Craib the good news, and soon he needed to fill the gaps in his design.

I need a standardized unit of measure and a replicable process for tempering the Silver and...

Arcus's thoughts were washed away by another wave of intense excitement. Without even realizing, he had started to refer to scientific terms from the man's world. He fetched a ruler. Units. That was what he needed first. To start with, he set the amount of aether needed for the most basic psychokinesis spell at ten. Next, he needed to come up with a name. He thought back to the books

he saw in the man's world. Often, they would describe amounts of magical power as "mana." That would do. Now he just had to map out how Silver reacted to different volumes of hot aether. In fact, now that he thought about it, there was still so much he had to do. Arcus ended up working through the night again, testing and refining his invention.

The next day, having completed his aethometer, Arcus went to visit Craib again. Just like before, he asked the guard to fetch Craib before rushing inside to see his uncle. He knew full well that it was a poor show of manners, but he was just so excited he couldn't help himself. Only narrowly avoiding a collision with a servant, he burst into the room where Craib was waiting for him.

"Uncle, Uncle, Uncle!"

"Lemme guess... You stayed up all night again? You need to learn to calm down, y'know?"

Craib only half looked like he was joking, although he didn't seem surprised to see Arcus; he had likely already been warned.

"Are you busy this morning?" Arcus asked eagerly.

"I've got work, but I don't have to leave just yet. Just... chill a little first, okay?"

Arcus obeyed, taking a deep breath to calm himself. He finally found the wherewithal to look around the room. Presently they shared it with three servants.

"I'd like to speak privately, if that's alright with you," Arcus said.

"Sure."

Although Craib looked just a little doubtful, he dismissed the servants with a wave of his hand. Arcus produced the aethometer from his bag only after the door was closed behind them.

"Please, have a look at this."

"What, one of the glass tubes I sent to you?" Craib studied it closely. "Huh? What are these lines? Did you put somethin' in here?"

"I'll release some aether now. See what happens to the Sorcerer's Silver

inside?”

“Huh... It moves. Neat. I dunno though. If I was a kid, I’d get bored of a toy like... Hold up. These measuring lines... Is this what I think it is?!”

As Arcus expected, Craib was quick on the uptake. He couldn’t help but let a smug smile play on his lips as he watched his uncle’s astonished expression and the way his hands trembled as he held the device.

“How did you do it?” Craib asked.

“I just so happened to notice some Sorcerer’s Silver reacting to my aether and... Well, I came up with this!”

“You just ‘came up with it’?”

“It was nothing but coincidence, really.”

It was partly true. Arcus supposed he had Lecia to thank for the happy accident that his outside knowledge let him exploit.

Now it was Craib’s turn to get excited. Waiting for him to calm down, Arcus took a quiet seat on the couch. After studying the aethometer for a good while, Craib let out a sigh. All at once, his expression hardened.

“You haven’t shown this to anyone but me, right?” he asked.

“Just you,” Arcus assured him. “I do understand the nature of what I’ve created.”

“I knew you were a smart one. Good thinking to get those servants outta here, too.” The tiniest of humorous glints appeared in Craib’s eye. “This thing you’ve made could be huge.”

“I understand that. No one has ever been able to measure aether accurately, right?” Arcus pressed.

“Right. I’ve never seen anything like this in my travels. This is really something...”

“This could further mankind’s understanding of magic, couldn’t it?”

“Yeah, I mean, being able to tell just how much power you need for a spell... It’s a game changer.” Placing the aethometer onto the glass table in front of

him, Craib's expression hardened once more. "I'd love to ask how you made this thing, but there's something I gotta check first. What are you planning to do with this exactly?"

Arcus hesitated. His main objective was to use it to expand his own repertoire of spells, of course, but Craib was asking a bigger question than that.

"I don't wish to keep this invention to myself," Arcus said. "I want to announce it to the world, but I will have to be careful about the timing."

"You sure? You'd have a huge advantage over other magicians if you kept it a secret."

"Perhaps. But somebody would be bound to find out eventually, and then they would want it for themselves. If I announce it, my name and fortune are as good as made, and I've served my country in the process."

Arcus could understand the appeal of keeping his invention under wraps. The idea of being stronger than any other magician out there gave him a rush of superiority. On the other hand, the benefits of going public daunted his imagination; he wanted to see what the world would do with his creation.

Anybody could learn to measure the aether they needed with practice. The aethometer would simply speed up that process. Arcus didn't have a problem giving away that time advantage, since the real strength of a magician came from how they constructed their spells. He expected his uncle to launch into an explanation of what he already realized, but he didn't.

"Looks like you got it already. You got good foresight, y'know." Craib ruffled Arcus's hair. "I know I don't gotta tell you this, but don't tell anyone about this thing just yet, okay? We gotta make sure everything's right for you to announce it."

"What about my friends?" Arcus asked.

"I guess friends are okay, so long as you're sure they ain't gonna tell anyone either." Craib paused. "I didn't know you had friends."

"Of course I do!" protested Arcus.

Craib let out a laugh.

“Oh, and don’t tell Lecia, either. I get that you’d wanna, but it’s safer not to. You get why, right?”

“Yes, I do,” Arcus mumbled.

If he told Lecia, the risk of the news getting to Joshua and Celine—the whole Raytheft estate, really—was too great. He didn’t trust any of them not to steal the credit for his invention.

Arcus was surprised just how wary Craib was of the people who had birthed him. Perhaps the rift between them was deeper than he thought, despite his uncle’s regular visits.

“You probably know Joshua can be... pretty jealous,” Craib told him, a sad note creeping into his voice. “He especially hates more talented magicians.”

“Is that right? I would’ve thought he was more the type to look down on those he deems weaker than him.”

“Huh. That’s some way to talk about your old man.”

“I no longer consider him my ‘old man,’ as you put it,” replied Arcus. As far as Arcus was concerned, their filial ties were destroyed the moment Joshua physically assaulted him. “Although I can’t help but wonder how he ended up like that. He was chosen as the Raytheft heir, right?”

“That’s exactly why,” Craib countered. “It put a real stick up his—well, it made him see everyone stronger than him as a threat to the house’s name.”

To borrow a word from that man’s world, he had a complex. Arcus didn’t know how good of a sorcerer Joshua was, but he could imagine the pressure that came from being the face of the Raythefts.

“He might’ve been fine if I hadn’t come back...” Craib continued. “This might sound like I’m braggin’, but when I came back here after my li’l tour of the world, I was way stronger than when I left, and I was carryin’ all this clout with the army and the crown he could only dream of. Even just as a plain old magician, my reputation improved. Dad put the cherry on top with his last words.”

“What did he say?” Arcus asked.

“He told Joshua that he messed up by naming him heir.”

“Whoa.”

That was harsh. No wonder Joshua had developed insecurities.

“After that, I reckon Joshua expected too much from you and Lecia. He probably felt his own worth was pinned on how talented you two were. Makes sense considering what he did to you, right?”

In other words, Joshua couldn't face the idea of his son being talentless when he considered himself to be so powerful, and for his self-image's sake, it had to be Arcus's fault. Although Arcus understood his disinheritance to stem from the Raythefts' rules, Joshua's treatment of him never made much sense until now. Perhaps Arcus's grandfather and his last words really were to blame, but given Joshua's personality, things would likely have ended up like this anyway.

Craib cast his gaze away from Arcus.

“Y'know... That means it's my fault you got treated so badly.”

“I don't think—”

“It's my fault. Sugarcoat it all you want, but if I hadn't come back, things wouldn't have turned out like this.”

Perhaps Craib agreed so readily to teach Arcus magic because of the guilt he shouldered. Arcus had the feeling his uncle had wanted to convey these things to him for a while.

“I-I can't thank you enough, Uncle! For everything you've done for me!”

Maybe it was true that Craib's return caused all this trouble, but that didn't erase everything his uncle did for him. He learned everything he knew from him, and thanks to him, Arcus wasn't living out a miserable existence; Craib helped to keep Joshua and Celine in check, too. Arcus didn't have the words to express just how grateful he was, but he tried his best. Craib let out a sigh of relief.

“Thanks. That makes me feel a little better.”

Craib took a puff from the cigar in his hand, but whether it was from embarrassment or nostalgia, Arcus couldn't tell. Idly watching the smoke

circling above them, he leaned back against the couch. Arcus waited patiently for him to finish his cigar, at which point Craib turned his gaze back toward the aethometer.

“Y’know something? You’re a genius.”

Although Craib seemed to mellow out while speaking about his brother, his excitement looked to be returning. He was grinning from ear to ear; he still sounded like he couldn’t believe what his eyes told him.

“I’d still like to discuss it with you if you have the time,” Arcus requested.

“Oh, right.” Craib rang the bell to call a servant, who didn’t take long to arrive. “Hey, I’m gonna have to call off work today. Something urgent’s come up. Mind tellin’ ’em sorry for me?”

The servant nodded before bowing his head and leaving the room.

There were many things that Arcus wanted to talk to Craib about. First, he explained how he created the aethometer. He also wanted Craib’s advice on production: how many he should look to make and such. After spending the entire day going over the details, they decided to visit a glassmith to aid with production.

Arcus carried out experiment after experiment with the aethometer, wanting to refine the design as much as possible. He looked at whether he could improve the Sorcerer’s Silver: whether it could measure larger amounts of aether or with greater accuracy. Again and again, he turned up hitches in his design to correct. Thanks to his endless efforts, he succeeded in improving on his prototype.

He discovered that mixing red pigment with the Silver kept it expanded for longer and reduced friction as it traversed the tube. Keeping each tube the same length, he changed the qualities of the Silver inside it, as well as the rate of expansion. He prepared tubes that could measure up to 50, 100, and 500 mana, which would be useful for different kinds of spells.

With all those improvements, he could carefully control and sustain his aether output. It wasn’t like a magician would be able to use an aethometer in every situation, so it was still important for them to be able to trust their gut.

However, being able to measure aether by numbers like this would make all the difference in the world. They would be able to measure how much was required for every last word and clause of their spells. The once-inescapable trial-and-error approach was obsolete. It couldn't be overstated how much time this invention would save the average magician.

And so, the aethometer's design was finalized.

Craib and Arcus were nothing short of overjoyed. They spent the next entire week refining the spells they already knew with their new aethometer readings. What pleased Arcus more than anything was just how excited his uncle was about the whole thing.

"Your name is gonna go down in history! Congratulations, Arcus!"

Arcus loved how his uncle shared his intense passion for magic.

It was becoming even more apparent just how revolutionary his invention was. Beyond its vast ramifications for the field at large, it could give the nation's army an unspeakable edge. The latter point left a bad taste in Arcus's mouth from what he knew of war in the man's memories, but he knew there would have to be compromises in announcing his creation.

In any case, he still needed to work out the timing for his announcement. To gain permission, he had to speak to the royal family and the Institute of Magic. Before that, he needed to gather as much data as possible and have a stockpile of aethometers at the ready.

And so, Arcus's years-long project with Craib began.

One day, Arcus was taking a break from the aethometer to work on spell development. He hid himself away in the corner of the Raythefts' garden. Though there were no hedges or flower patches to conceal him, this patch of fresh lawn was difficult to see from the estate itself. He often came here to practice magic, but this time was a little different.

Arcus cast his mind back to the incident with Sue. His *Scrapped Arms* attack failed to knock out the kidnapper, and as a result the two of them only barely managed to escape. It was total carelessness on Arcus's part. He'd gambled on

the effectiveness of an attack he never field-tested and lost.

Arcus didn't want to take a risk like that ever again. Though in theory magic was capable of anything with the right words, that didn't always translate into reality. The important thing was to try things out and practice spells over and over to see what worked. This was especially important to Arcus, who wanted to do more than just imitate forces of nature or improve on extant spells. He wanted to make something the world had never seen, and his memories from the man's world were the best source of inspiration for that.

The first thing that came to mind was guns. Arcus saw them often in movies from the man's world. A single pull of the trigger sent a metal bullet traveling at imperceptible speed, and your opponent was wounded in a heartbeat. In this world, most attacks were visible. By creating one that couldn't be seen, Arcus could catch his opponent off guard. The main issue was that gunshot wounds were very often fatal.

I'm not sure I could do anything about that, though...

Kidnappers and the like still ran rampant through the streets, despite the kingdom's efforts in the name of security. Showing mercy or hesitating could prove a fatal mistake against opponents like them. Regret after the fact wouldn't be enough to undo your mistake. Arcus gained more than knowledge from his dreams; a foreign set of ethics came with it. You could rarely afford to show mercy to your opponents here.

Arcus already had plenty of words and clauses memorized, thanks to his wide reading. All he needed was to assemble them and create an image in his mind of what he wanted to happen. To help his imagination along, Arcus bent his fingers so that his right hand resembled a gun. He stretched his arm out in front of him.

"Black Bullet. Rip through the air faster than sound and tear apart the wind."

Artglyphs swirled up around him, forming a magic circle around Arcus's index finger. They spun, and Arcus felt a weight in his arm.

So far, so good... but what is my aether doing?

Concentrated aether whirled inside his right arm. It felt like blood boiling as it

passed through his veins. No longer able to keep his arm up under its own weight, he brought his left hand under his elbow to steady it. The next moment, there was a loud snap as a black bullet shot from his finger. A plume of aether rose like smoke from the tip.

It was just like a real gun. But Arcus wasn't ready to celebrate just yet.

Something was... off.

It was certainly powerful enough. It shot a hole right through its target. Arcus realized his failure the moment he saw the black bullet. You weren't supposed to be able to see bullets in flight. Even though he instructed it to move "*faster than sound*," the bullet moved too slowly, and Arcus couldn't work out why. He thought over his exact phrasing.

Perhaps I should use the gun's mechanism as the basis for my spell...

The problem was that the mechanism wasn't common knowledge.

Explosive, detonation, propellant... These words existed in the man's world but had no equivalent in artglyphs, nor even in the language spoken in Lainur. Spells depended on the precision of the artglyphs used to form them. If Arcus couldn't dictate what he wanted clearly and precisely, then it was impossible to recreate a gun's mechanism perfectly. He asked Craib, too, but he said those words didn't exist within artglyphs.

They must exist... Arcus thought to himself. They simply haven't been discovered yet!

Even if they did exist, there was no doubt they would be difficult to use. An "explosion" was a powerful force, requiring dense qualifier clauses before it could be used in a spell safely. Arcus feared it would make his spell too long-winded. He decided to go back to the basics.

I cannot get rid of "Black Bullet"...

"Black Bullet" came from the second Ancient Chronicle, *The Spiritual Age*. It referred to the metallic sling-stones used to shoot down the beasts which came from the forest to attack the village. It was the most appropriate phrase he could use to create a solid projectile.

“Rip through the air faster than sound and tear apart the wind.” *That’s where my problem is...*

The clause described the bullet’s behavior. Arcus created it from single words rather than borrowing it from a book. Still, it was strange the bullet failed to do what he asked of it. If his composition was the problem, then perhaps it would be better to rely on a set phrase. Arcus opened up his notebook.

“Let’s see...” he murmured to himself. “‘Artglyph phrases are created by linking several single words together. While the words composing the phrase give its meaning, its meaning may also be influenced by factors like its context. This gives one phrase several potential effects...’”

For example, there was the spell that Sue cast against the kidnapper. She used a set phrase: “incinerate the darkness.” Taking the meaning literally, “incinerate” was, of course, to “destroy something by burning.” The phrase’s original use in the Chronicles—even the author’s intent—could alter the spell’s nature.

“*The Magician’s Elegy*, the fifth Chronicle,” Arcus whispered. Then, he began to recite.

“O vengeful magician, weave fire into thy words.

May they blaze with overwhelming force and incinerate the darkness.

May they fill the silent night and engulf yonder buildings, burning bright.”

This section spoke of a magician who lost someone he loved and was set in a city at night. He turned his words into flame to exact his revenge, turning the black night red with flames.

The phrase “incinerate the darkness” therefore had three meanings. Firstly, to burn something up; secondly, to fight back against the dark of night; and thirdly, for those fires to burn strong with vengeance.

Whatever world you lived in, a word’s meaning and nuances shifted with the situation. In the same way, you had to take a phrase’s context into account when using it in a spell. In Arcus’s case, he wanted his spell to knock down his opponent in an instant. He thought back through the six Ancient Chronicles.

The Birth of Heaven and Earth *documents the creation of the Earth and sky.* The Spiritual Age *is a record of the time when spirits wandered Earth.* The Prophecy of Shadows *predicts the entire history and future of this world.* Documenting the Stars *describes a scholar's life as he follows the sky and the movements of the planets.* The Magician's Elegy *speaks about civilization as it was when magic flourished, and then there's Demons and Society's Collapse.*

Arcus decided to review *The Spiritual Age*, *Documenting the Stars*, and *The Magician's Elegy* for his spell.

The Spiritual Age collected stories similar to the fairy tales, legends, epics, and myths that existed in the man's world.

Documenting the Stars was a mysterious account left behind by a scholar who researched natural phenomena.

The Magician's Elegy was written during a time when the people here held just as much power as the technology in the man's world... before society collapsed.

"Like a meteor through space." Arcus considered for a moment.

It sounds impressive, but it's not quite what I'm looking for.

Though Arcus picked over phrase after phrase, none of them stuck in the slightest. He sat down in the garden, grumbling to himself for a while. Finally, he found a promising phrase in his notes on *The Spiritual Age*.

I'll try this one.

Arcus held out his arm, replicating the shape of a gun with his hand again. He muttered the phrase under his breath over and over, keeping an eye on the aethometer beside him. Once he was satisfied, he spoke the full spell aloud.

"Black Bullet. Keep the pale horse galloping through the skies in the blink of Death's eye."

There was a crack as Arcus felt an enormous pressure on his arm. Just as before, the bullet tore a hole through its target. The bullet moved too fast for him to see anything. It was just like a real gun.

Now I just need to work out how much aether this spell uses.

Keeping his eye on his aethometer once more, Arcus set to work experimenting with his aether output.

After three days of trial and error, Arcus's *Black Ammo* spell was complete. While it would have looked more impressive if it weren't invisible, it was just as powerful and effective as any pistol. It was bound to keep Arcus safe in a range of situations. He just wished that he was able to use language more specific to guns in his spell.

Ever since the kidnapping incident, Arcus and Sue met up from time to time. They spent a lot of their time around the city playing, as children should, as well as simply talking. That wasn't to say their relationship was equal; it was usually Sue who called the shots on what they would do.

Just as Arcus noted the first time they sat in the plaza together, once you started a conversation with Sue about magic, she would really get into it. Her eyes would light up immediately, and she would tell you just when you should use a certain word or what meanings she thought a certain phrase held. Arcus always got so engrossed in those conversations that time seemed to flash by, in no small part due to his own enthusiasm.

After all this time, Arcus still didn't know about Sue's background. He suspected she must be a noble child hiding her status, but she never confirmed this. She even apologized for being unable to speak about her identity.

"I'm sorry... I can't tell you. But I'm really happy that you're my friend!"

Her anxious gaze was earnest, telling Arcus that it was likely family troubles keeping her from being honest with him. Maybe she was like him and had trouble making friends.

As they often did, they were spending the day studying together. The locale changed each time, but today it was their regular café, sitting down on the terrace. It wasn't a fancy place by any means, and you wouldn't find any expensive teas here, but the atmosphere was relaxing enough. Although Arcus couldn't afford to come too often, it was nice to be able to sit back with a cup of tea and not have to worry about being kidnapped. Sat at one corner, Arcus and Sue pored over their study materials together. On the round wooden table lay

the Ancient Chronicles, pens, notepads, and a glass tea set. Meanwhile, Sue was enjoying some candy. Arcus couldn't enjoy the stuff nearly as much as she did—not with his memories of refined sugars, corn syrup, and benzene rings for comparison.

The two of them usually spent their study sessions explaining to the other what they learned in their own studies. Bringing their heads together, they worked to pull new artglyphs and words from the Chronicles. There were, of course, words and phrases which they needed to explain to one another, and that took precedence.

“See? This word's in this phrase, too!”

“Then what about this one?”

“I think... that's from this line here, isn't it?” Arcus picked up one of the books containing the Chronicles. Checking his notes, he frowned. “According to *The Birth of Heaven and Earth*, it's when the ground shakes violently, like a shockwave through the earth. In other words, an earthquake.”

“An earthquake...” Sue echoed.

“I'll read this out to you. ‘With a loud groan, the earth destroyed the hills of Bahr. Mountains, valleys, rivers, and seas, swallowed up and flattened. Everything left was lost to the darkness of despair, as voices wailed through the emptiness.’”

This passage likely described a huge phenomenon where the earth itself shifted. It must have been quite something to be able to affect mountains, rivers, and seas.

“I dunno if you'd be able to use that word in a spell,” Sue pondered.

“Indeed,” Arcus agreed. “It does seem a little too powerful.”

Not only that, but too much for a magician to handle. The amount of aether required aside, Arcus couldn't think of any words to pair up with “earthquake” that would keep it in check. Even if there were, the resulting spell would probably be overly long and complex. Writing it down would be no problem, but long spells left more room for stuttering and pronunciation errors.

Sue leaned back in her seat.

“Think we could take a break? My brain’s hurting.”

“All right,” Arcus said, closing up the books in front of them.

As their minds turned away from studying, Arcus found himself thinking back to the kidnapping incident once more. There was one thing in particular weighing on him.

“Sue,” he began, “could I ask you about the spell you attempted when we faced that kidnapper?”

“Huh?” Sue frowned. “I used a ton of spells. Which one do you mean?”

“Remember? The one you attempted just before I used my *Scrapped A*—”

“Oh, *that* one?!” Sue immediately straightened up in her seat and gave a nervous laugh. “It’s, um... Ahem!”

“You mean you can’t tell me?” Arcus asked.

“It’s, um... like a family secret.”

So he was right.

“In that case, I won’t push it.”

“I’m sorry. You’re always telling me so much stuff about yourself, but I hardly tell you anything.”

“That isn’t true.”

It hurt Arcus that Sue seemed to think he contributed to their friendship more than her. His relationship with her was based on mutual aid. While Arcus used the man’s memories to teach her about words relating to concepts and phenomena that were largely unknown in this world, Sue taught him a great deal of words and phrases drawn from antiquity—she had a voracious appetite for history. Thanks to her, he could read some of the terms he struggled with before, as well as unearth new meanings to phrases he was already familiar with. “*The blink of Death’s eye*,” a key clause in his *Black Ammo* spell, was something he learned from Sue. The truth was, she helped him out a great deal.

In any case, if she couldn’t tell him about her spell, then he hoped she

wouldn't mind him trying to analyze it a little. Ever since he received that man's memories, Arcus's own memory capacity had advanced far beyond his years. It was a piece of cake for him to memorize new words and phrases, and he could recite some of the man's more well-read books by heart. Recalling Sue's exact words on that day was not a problem.

"May the echo of these footsteps ignite the firmament. O, dazzling skies..."

That was it. If Arcus broke down the spell into parts, he should be able to work out its effect. After checking to see whether any of the parts belonged to certain phrases (they didn't), he set about analyzing the meaning of each word.

"The firmament... 'sky' as the boundary between spirit and matter. And footsteps which ignite it..." Arcus mused aloud.

Sue looked up at him quizzically, letting out a gasp as she realized what he was doing. She froze for a split second before waving her arms at him.

"Wait! Stop! Stop, stop, stop right there!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"No more thinking! Turn your brain off right this moment!"

"I would, but I don't wish to die. Besides, it's just a small part of the spell," Arcus pointed out. "I fail to see the problem."

"It's a huge problem! 'Cause I know you're gonna work it out! Especially since those words are so specific!"

"Are they...?" Arcus responded.

While "firmament" and "footsteps" were common enough in everyday language, the artglyphs used for them were particularly obscure, even among magicians. If he recalled correctly, they came up in *The Prophecy of Shadows*. Specifically, a part Craib gave up on working out.

Arcus reached for his copy.

"Y-You can read *The Prophecy of Shadows*?!" Sue gasped.

"Not much of it, and I only started recently," Arcus replied.

"You're such a weirdo! You're like... You're too smart!" Sue protested.

“I’m sorry?” Arcus blinked at her. “Is that how you speak to a friend?”

The two began to bicker, which was hopefully a sign of their deepening friendship...

One day, Craib arrived at the Raytheft estate.

“Hello, Uncle,” Arcus greeted him. “What brings you here?”

This was the first time that Craib had actively come to see Arcus, rather than Arcus visiting him. A servant brought him down to the drawing room, where he found Craib lying back on the couch and smoking a cigar. It wasn’t clear whether he was invited in or if he just barged through the front door, but either way, Arcus was impressed at the courage he showed by setting foot in the house he had absconded from. Maybe he didn’t feel the need to act like a visitor on the grounds that he used to live here.

Once Arcus sat down on the dark-brown leather couch, Craib ground out his cigar into an ashtray.

“Arcus,” he began, “you’re gettin’ an attendant.”

“An attendant?”

“Yeah. He’s a good guy. You can trust him, okay?”

“That... wasn’t my issue.” Arcus frowned. “I was just wondering where all of this came from.”

“It’s ’cause of that thing you made,” Craib explained. “You need someone nearby to talk about it to, right? In case somethin’ comes up or you wanna bounce ideas off them. Well, you don’t have to tell him anything if you don’t want. That’s up to you. But you’ll have to get him a room and help sort his luggage.”

Craib clapped his hands in a peculiar rhythm.

“You can come in now.”

The door opened, revealing a handsome young man standing behind it.

From his appearance, Arcus guessed that he was in his late teens or early

twenties. His indigo hair was cut into a short bob, and he wore a monocle. He wore a morning coat with a tie that matched his hair, topped off with immaculate black gloves. A rapier lay at his hip.



He reminded Arcus of the butlers from the man's world. He had a sharp glare, which, combined with everything else, made him look incredibly intelligent. They were the kind of looks that would make him extremely popular with the ladies. His perfect features would give even the most beautiful woman a run for her money.

Arcus lamented that there was no word in his own language or the Elder Tongue equivalent to "Chad," as the man from the other world would use it, nor for any of the munitions he fantasized about turning on his new attendant in a fit of envy.

"This guy is your servant, Arcus." Craib turned to the man. "This weedy, girly-looking kid is Arcus. Your master."

Arcus thought Craib could stand to be a bit more formal with his introduction, among other things.

Arcus's new servant let out an exaggerated sigh.

"I never expected you to hand me over to somebody else, sir, especially not a child. In fact, I find this all rather unreasonable."

"Huh? What, did I do somethin' wrong?" Craib asked.

"Not wrong, no. But something absurd."

Any other master would have thoroughly punished him for not only speaking out of turn to their master but openly criticizing them, but Craib just laughed it off.

"He can be a bit of a wise guy, but he should be able to help you out," Craib said to Arcus, giving the servant a hearty thump on the back.

Initially, the servant reciprocated with a hard stare, but he eventually turned to Arcus with a resigned sigh. Putting a knee on the embroidered carpet, he put his right hand to his heart and gave a bow.

"I would like to thank Craib for introducing me. My name is Noah Ingvayne. I look forward to serving you, Master Arcus."

"I-It's a pleasure to meet you..." Arcus replied, still wrapping his head around the situation.

Noah looked up at him.

“Forgive me, but please do not feel that you must address me formally. I am your servant. Being overly formal with one’s servant can be an excuse for mockery from others.”

“Um... You know I’ve been disinherited, don’t you?”

“For now, yes. Although the question of what you intend to do from here on remains.” Noah’s serious gaze pierced through Arcus as it sought an answer.

Arcus froze. What did he want to do? Now that he had a servant, he would need to think carefully about how to use him appropriately. If he truly wanted revenge on Joshua and Celine, maybe he should take the same route Craib did and work his way back up the social ladder. It might benefit him to start learning how to act as a noble now so that things would be easier in the future. Arcus looked back into Noah’s indigo eyes.

“Yes, s—I mean, all right. It’s nice to meet you.”

“The pleasure is all mine.”

“You’ll need him to teach you how to be a good noble,” Craib pitched in.

Craib clearly expected Arcus to follow in his footsteps. Maybe he saw something in Arcus that reminded him of himself.

“You talk too formally to him, too,” Craib added, turning to Noah. “I can’t remember if you were like this with me, but I think you could stand to loosen up a little, y’know.”

“I was not, but only because your manner of speaking is far too informal,” Noah replied. “Perhaps I would have had more time to prepare had you informed me of these arrangements more than a few hours ago.”

“I get it already! I’m sorry, okay?”

It wasn’t long before the two started bickering. Noah seemed to have a hard time keeping his thoughts to himself. At the same time, Craib seemed to enjoy the banter. Arcus could tell how well they got on, but it also concerned him.

“Noah, are you sure it’s okay for you to leave my uncle?” he asked.

Surely servants had preferences in who they worked for. Arcus couldn't imagine how Noah felt having to change masters all of a sudden.

"It is not a problem," Noah reassured him.

"Really?"

"Change can be exciting." There was a small twinkle in Noah's deep-blue eyes.

"E-Exciting?" Arcus repeated.

"Indeed. I became Craib's servant because I knew it would not be boring. You know him well, and so I believe you can understand why. When he promised me an even more exciting term of service under yourself, I trusted fully in his judgment. So far, I have not been disappointed."

"That's why you accepted, despite the short notice," Arcus said, blinking at Craib.

He didn't miss the small chuckle that Noah barely managed to stifle. Although he looked serious on the outside, it seemed he had a warm heart.

"You can be pretty entertainin', Arcus," Craib assured him.

"If you say so..." Arcus replied.

"I know so! You're way more fun to be around than me, 'cause you're so unusual." Craib nodded enthusiastically, but Arcus couldn't share in his joy.

He wasn't sure if he was being mocked or not. Although he couldn't deny he wasn't exactly normal...

"Anyway, you can trust Noah with your life! Make sure you rely on him, yeah?" Craib continued.

"I will. Thank you," Arcus said.

"No need to thank me. You've helped me more than enough yourself." Craib gave Arcus a pat on the head.

Craib didn't seem to know his own strength sometimes; it hurt more than it should for a display of affection. Perhaps if his uncle stopped hitting his head so hard, Arcus would be able to grow a few feet.

So it was that Noah Ingwayne became Arcus's servant.

Noah Ingwayne was a magician who specialized in ice magic and grew up with a butler's education. According to Craib, he was a prodigy who graduated at the top of his class from the Royal Institute of Magic. After he did, he received a battery of employment requests, but in the end he refused all of them so he could work for Craib. Arcus wondered whether that was because working under Craib was particularly fulfilling, or if it was just because he seemed "fun." Perhaps it was neither.

His fellow students at the institute nicknamed him the "Winter Wunderkind," reflecting both his good looks, his cool intellect, and, obviously, his affinity for all things gelid. It fit him perfectly. He was well-versed in magic, the national style of rapier fencing, and aide-de-campship. He was also an adept student of Imperial history and etiquette.

At first, Arcus was worried Joshua and Celine would have something to say about him taking on a servant, but Craib spoke to them and sorted everything out for him. In the end, they said nothing. It would be stranger if they said anything at all; they still treated Arcus as though he didn't exist, and it was Craib who was paying Noah's salary.

Noah helped Arcus out with his everyday chores. He also taught him the ins and outs of noble conduct, as well as some basic education and self-defense training. The first two he picked up incredibly quickly, thanks to his superior memory. It was mostly a matter of putting them into practice. As for self-defense, Noah taught him the basics, and the rest came from the man's weight training from Arcus's dream. Granted, there was only so much progress he could make with an eight-year-old's body. The man had also practiced fencing, or at least a rough equivalent. However, with his small body and lack of a suitably-sized partner, Arcus decided he wouldn't try and recreate that for now.

In any case, it might arouse suspicion if he suddenly came out one day as a proficient sword-fighter at his age, so he decided he ought to wait until he had a little more experience in self-defense.

In terms of magic, Arcus was already at the stage where he was making his own spells thanks to Craib's training, and so there wasn't really anything that Noah could teach him. He *did* teach Arcus some new spells, but apart from that, Arcus considered him more of a research partner than anything else.

“Are you ready, Master Arcus?”

Today, Noah and Arcus were practicing magic in their usual hidden corner of the garden.

“Could you start by using the spells you use most often?” Arcus requested. “Any spells you’re allowed to share with me, that is. As many as you can.”

“Of course...”

Noah agreed, though he seemed curious about what his master was up to. Arcus could understand why. Usually Noah would explain the spells to him before demonstrating. This time, though, it was important for him to see them first.

Arcus approached Noah, taking out a notepad and aethometer. Noah’s curious gaze intensified, but as soon as Arcus gave him a nod, he began to chant a spell.

“Shattered shards of ice in the shriveled garden under the chilling wind. Freeze up from the very depths of glistening hell, and bring these soldiers and chariot wheels to a halt.”

With those words, a magic circle began to spin beneath Noah’s feet, and a chilling wind picked up. Tiny white specks like diamonds rode it, sparkling in the sun. Those specks fell to the ground, freezing the corner of the garden in an instant.

“Wow!” Arcus breathed.

“This is my *Freezing Gale*. What do you think?”

“It’s impressive. Did you make it yourself, Noah?”

“Indeed. I developed it from *Icy Breeze*, an ice spell which works to hold back the progression of one’s enemies.”

“I see. I’ll have to categorize it properly, then...”

Magicians often built their portfolio by improving on the framework of extant spells. Arcus dropped his gaze to his notepad and the notes he scribbled out while Noah was casting his magic.

(“Shattered shards of ice” = 70 mana; “Chilling wind” = 50 mana; “Depths of glistening hell” = 300 mana. “Soldiers,” “chariot wheels,” “halt” = 30, 10, 20 mana respectively) = 480 mana total.

As Arcus jotted some more notes, Noah peered over his shoulder.

“What are you doing there, Master Arcus?”

“I’m calculating the mana you used for your spell just now.”

“Mana?” Noah said.

“That’s right. It’s the unit I measure aether in.”

Noah blinked in confusion as Arcus held up the aethometer to show him. It seemed Craib really hadn’t said anything about this to his former servant. Though his mind looked like it was going blank, when Arcus passed the aethometer toward him, he took it instinctively. Then he stared at it until at last he was ready to pass comment.

“I have never seen anything like this before. Just where on earth did you get it?”

“I made it.”

“You made it?”

“This is the final version, which my uncle helped me to complete. But basically...” Arcus explained it to him, and Noah understood instantly.

“I see. I understand now why Craib passed me on to you.” Noah let out a frustrated sigh. “Though I should have liked for him to tell me about this sort of thing earlier...”

Even though Craib said that it was up to Arcus whether he wanted to tell Noah about the aethometer or not, his uncle probably never believed that he would keep it quiet. He knew exactly what he was doing.

“He probably wanted to keep it a surprise for you,” said Arcus.

“I daresay so. I shall have to plot my revenge somehow,” Noah replied thoughtfully.

“Revenge?”

“Yes. I shall have to come up with some sort of surprise for him.”

Arcus didn't understand why such a trivial thing necessitated “revenge,” but there was still a lot he didn't understand about his servant.

“So this is why I'd like you to use every spell you can, so that I can measure their mana cost.”

“Of course I can. However, I should like to ask what exactly you are planning to do with that information.”

“It's part of my preparation for unveiling the aethometer to the world,” Arcus explained. “I want to have some examples of words and phrases and their mana cost first. I won't include anything that shouldn't be made public, of course. Plus, having a record like this will help me in creating my own spells later.”

“I understand. Might it be possible for me to borrow one of those aethometers?” Noah asked.

“Of course. But as I'm sure you know, there's one condition,” Arcus warned him.

“Don't worry. I shan't be telling anybody about it. Keeping matters clandestine falls under my duty as your servant.”

Arcus hadn't expected differently, but he wanted to be sure. He passed Noah the three aethometers that he had been keeping just for him. Noah studied them, his eyes widening in wonder again. Arcus did feel a slight twinge of reluctance giving them away like this, but he imagined his uncle would feel the same way in this situation.

“There is more than one kind?” Noah asked.

“I've made three different ones,” Arcus explained, “for when you want to measure more precisely or with larger amounts of aether. I'll probably make other kinds if the need arises.”

Unlike the thermometer, the aethometer wasn't “one size fits all.” Aether had a much wider range than temperature did.

Arcus looked back up at his servant, who seemed to have frozen with the aethometers still in hand. If the thing itself came as a surprise to him, then to

have three different kinds probably blew his mind. When he could finally move again, Noah's lip curled.

"Craib was right. Working for you is exciting indeed." Noah chuckled.

Arcus took that as a good sign.

"So if you wouldn't mind using some more spells..."

"As you wish."

And so, Arcus spent the rest of the day measuring the mana of the phrases and words in Noah's spells.

Noah was in high spirits from the moment he received the aethometers. Though his professional composure remained unbroken, when he had nothing to do, he would excitedly pull out a notebook and flit his sparkling eyes between it and their readings.

He was a magician through and through. He kept remarking on how revolutionary an invention it was, calling it "marvelous" and going on about how he couldn't wait to use it to improve his spellcraft.

Arcus was pleased that Noah seemed to like serving him, despite the sudden change in master. He often pestered him, asking whether Arcus had any other entertaining toys up his sleeve, to which Arcus would reply that he was a magician, not a clown.

Thanks to Noah, Arcus found that his everyday life went much more smoothly than before. He didn't have to clean his own room anymore. He didn't have to worry about his meals or his laundry. Noah even set out Arcus's clothes for him. He worked hard, and that work was perfect. Every day, the excited screams of the female servants as he passed by seemed to get louder and louder.

He was practically perfect in every way, to the extent that Arcus sometimes doubted his humanity.

On top of that, there was the matter of Arcus's sword training. At the moment, the pair were together in Craib's garden, armed with wooden swords and ready to spar.

Noah was teaching Arcus the Imperial style. It was very similar to the western sword fighting that Arcus had seen in the man's world, where thrusting attacks were prominent. The main stance was a side-facing one, with your right hand holding your weapon out in front of you. You thrust out at your opponent with the tip of your sword, using sharp movements and focusing on where they were centering their own attacks. What followed was a series of thrusts from both sides.

Arcus grunted as they faced off against each other. His movements were clumsy, yet Noah's were clean and crisp. The tip of his sword never ended up where he aimed, either. It was like his weapon was cursed with some sort of hyper-flexibility spell. Even when he went in for a desperate attempt to sweep Noah, he couldn't hit, and when he twisted around and struck at a new angle, Noah saw through him immediately. Sometimes he would wait for Noah to approach him before launching a strike, but the gap between them was open again before he knew it.

Arcus's battle cries were good and loud, but apart from that, there wasn't much this eight-year-old could do against his adult opponent. It wasn't long before Noah's sword found its way to the base of Arcus's throat, and it was far from the first time that day. Noah had been going easier and easier on Arcus each time, and yet he remained undefeated. Noah included, there was something extraordinary about the physical strength people possessed in this world, Arcus thought. While the general population was on par with the common people in the man's world, here your genes and training could lead you to be just as powerful as the heroes that the man could only read about in stories.

Arcus could almost hear the man's voice now.

Now these are the kind of characters I expect to see in an isekai!

Arcus slumped to the floor, completely out of breath.

"Y-You're amazing, Noah," he breathed, unable to come up with anything more eloquent in his current state.

"I cannot allow myself to lose to you," Noah mentioned. "Else Craib has threatened me with 're-training.'"

“Is Craib good at fencing too?” Arcus asked.

“He is good at everything.”

“Oh...”

Magic, fencing... not to mention he was a proficient soldier. Craib might have been a little *too* overpowered.

Noah offered Arcus his hand, which he took gratefully.

“Pardon my rudeness, but if I may say something...” Noah began.

“Yes?”

“You seem to be overthinking your moves and working to implement those which may be too much for you. While your mind is overworking, your body is struggling to keep up.”

“O-Oh...”

“Your strategies are a little over-ambitious at times. I would suggest you tone things down just a touch.”

“Okay...”

“It is vital to master the basic skills if you wish to master the art. While your form is in no way poor, I do think you ought to work more on your fundamental movements.”

Arcus nodded. Noah wasn’t saying he was hopeless, which was something. However...

What does he mean by “strategies”? I wasn’t really trying anything too over the top...

He wasn’t surprised Noah had that impression, though. In his mind, he was working through the man’s movements during his own fencing training and trying to recreate them with his much smaller body. He lacked the deep knowledge to pull them off, though, so it was no wonder Noah thought them peculiar.

Maybe I really do just need to grow a bit first.

While the man also started his sword-training from a young age, his

repertoire of movements increased as he grew taller. “Tall” being the operative word; Arcus still had quite a long way to go...

After finishing his training with Noah, Arcus returned to the Raytheft estate. In the corridor, he spotted Lecia. She was wearing her usual blue-ribbioned ponytail and comfortable-looking skirt. Despite the Raythefts’ reputation as a military family, Celine certainly liked to dress her daughter up like a doll. Lecia’s footsteps were graceful, causing her skirt to sway as she walked.

“Good morning, Lecia,” Arcus called out to her.

Lecia jumped slightly before responding.

“Brother! Good morning!” Her gaze swept the hall, and she peered around the corners before letting out a sigh of relief. “...I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay; I understand. Is something the matter?”

“I’m just worried Mother and Father will catch me with you,” Lecia admitted.

“Ah.”

Nothing new there, then. It sounded like they were doubling down on their decision. Arcus and Lecia had only bumped into each other, but even then he wouldn’t put it past them to punish her for it.

“I suppose they’re still badmouthing me?” he said.

“Yes. They’re calling you a disgrace, and they say if I go near you, I shall become as ‘useless’ as you are.”

“I see.”

Clearly, they saw him as some sort of parasite which fed on others’ superiority. It was like their disdain of him was growing by the day. It no longer bothered Arcus, but he wished they wouldn’t drag Lecia down into their pettiness. He considered her relationship with him a real blessing, although he was aware that it would keep getting more difficult for her from now on. Her reaction upon seeing him told him that much.

“You do not have to be kind to me anymore,” Arcus said. “Not when we’re out in the open like this, at least.”

“But...”

“Understand?”

Lecia stared at the ground glumly. Eventually, she gave a nod. This was necessary to protect her, Arcus told himself. There was nothing else they could do for now but work on getting stronger, particularly in Arcus’s case, so that he could punish his parents for all they put him through.

There was no doubt in Arcus’s mind that Joshua expected great things from Lecia. Despite how he treated Arcus, he was still a clever man. He was likely depending on Lecia to grow up as a talented magician that he could show off to the world as the Raythefts’ heiress. If he found out how hard Arcus was working, he may well punish Lecia for it. She would be pressured to outperform Arcus again and suffer the brunt of Joshua’s anger if she failed. In which case, the safest thing to do was to avoid a situation where Arcus’s and Lecia’s talents could be directly compared.

Arcus made a mental note to keep his activities as discreet as possible.

The Magician’s Guild. Originally, it was merely an office which kept track of the magicians living in the kingdom. Now, it dealt with much more: official magic identification, advertising magical services by its members, and protections for magical activities.

Its black, four-story building was close to the palace, in a district dedicated to national offices.

After his meeting at the palace that morning, Guildmaster Godwald Sylvester returned to his own castle: the Magician’s Guild. In the carriage on the way, he turned to his elderly secretary, Balgeuse.

“I have a meeting first thing this afternoon, right?”

“Yes, sir. With one Craib Abend and two others accompanying him. They asked to meet where we could not be disturbed, and so I have reserved the Dark Room.”

“Oh? Do you think they’re up to something?”

“Scheming in a secret, soundproofed room is hardly new territory for you, sir.”

“Hmph. Go on then. What’s this meeting about?” Godwald asked after his secretary’s wisecrack.

There were three meeting rooms in the Guild. VIPs were seen in the Golden Room, the Blue Room was where many people were expected, and the Dark Room was for confidential affairs. It was a completely isolated, windowless room. It was where state magicians came to report on their research, and so it was used more often than one might think.

“Those two accompanying him... Are they servants?”

“Very likely,” Balgeuse replied. “Do you think he’s made some sort of discovery?”

“He hasn’t said anything to me.”

Craib was an old friend of Godwald’s. Back when Craib was still a runaway brat, he often turned up wherever Godwald went, causing him all sorts of trouble. After leaving his home and country, he even had the audacity to ask to become a state magician on his return.

Godwald was in almost constant contact with him, and Craib often came to him to discuss his research. Lately, however, he was so busy with military matters that he didn’t have time to launch any new research projects.

Yet here he was in the Dark Room. State magician Craib Abend, his servant, Noah Ingwayne, and a young girl Godwald didn’t recognize. She had the same silver hair as Craib and large ruby eyes set high on her pale face. On top she wore a white shirt and, despite being a young noble girl, was wearing shorts rather than a skirt. She even had a short sword on her hip, the kind usually reserved for self-defense.

The girl let out a small squeal when she saw Godwald’s face. Godwald didn’t mind; he was used to it. His expression was naturally stern, not to mention covered in scars. Children often cowered from him or even burst into tears.

This girl, however, suddenly righted herself and bowed in apology.

“I’m awfully sorry!” she cried.

“It’s alright.”

The girl bowed deeply again, as though she didn’t believe him. “I-I am truly, very sorry!”

She continued to apologize, as if Godwald intimidated her. He wondered if his face was really that scary.

He looked over at Craib and his servant, but they were both grinning from ear to ear. His servant, Noah Ingwayne, certainly suited him. Godwald heard he was usually rather stoic but held a sense of humor underneath.

The girl still looked anxious. It wasn’t until Craib reassured her it was all right that she calmed down, gave a final bow, and sat down on the couch.

The Guild’s flag spanning the wall behind him, Godwald sat down to face his visitors. He began by addressing Craib, the initiator of this meeting.

“I’ve met Noah before, of course, but... who is this young girl?”

“He’s my nephew,” Craib corrected him. “I mean, you can tell by his clothes he’s a boy, right?”

“Your nephew?” Godwald said.

He looked again. The child had a rather feminine face, but sure enough, his clothes were the usual kind for a noble boy. Godwald knew Craib himself had no children, but he *had* heard the Raythefts’ eldest son was disinherited.

“M-My name is Arcus Raytheft.” The boy introduced himself. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you. I am the Magician’s Guildmaster appointed by His Majesty, Godwald Sylvester.”

Craib jumped in to give his own introduction for Godwald.

“Arcus, this creep is the most important magician in the entire kingdom. Well, I mean, I guess the King is, actually... but this guy’s a close second, okay? Just remember it’s the guy with the scary face.”

“There’s no need to paint me as some sort of monster, Abend,” Godwald

warned him.

“Just breakin’ the ice.” Craib grinned. “Play along, will you?”

He was still ill-mannered, despite becoming a state magician and gaining a place in the peerage. Sure, he was technically correct about Godwald’s face, but he didn’t have to say it.

“So, what is this—” Godwald began.

“E-Excuse me!”

A loud, high-pitched voice from the other side of the door interrupted him. Godwald picked up on the nerves in it. The woman who entered was a recent hire.

“What is it? You’re interrupting,” Godwald said, a little more harshly than he intended.

The girl let out a small squeak before falling down in terror, sending the papers in her hand scattering across the floor. It seemed she had come to deliver these presumably urgent documents.

The woman curled up where she was like a frightened squirrel, tears already in her eyes.

“P-Please!” she whimpered. “Sp-Spare my life!”

“You can count on it. Now what’s the matter?” Godwald asked.

“I... I...!”

“Speak up!”

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I’m so, so, so sorry! Please! J-Just... I’ll do anything! But please just spare my life!”

She knelt on the floor, begging for forgiveness. The color drained from Arcus’s face. When he opened his mouth to speak, it was a moment before he could find the words.

“Y-You’re really going to kill her?” he asked. “Y-You’re going to bury her alive in concrete and throw her into the sea?!”

The woman let out another frightened squeak as Arcus described the manner

of her death.

“Of course I’m not going to kill her!” Godwald replied. “Please don’t say such things. They give people the wrong impression.”

“F-Forgive me, sir!” Arcus gasped, sitting up straight in his chair.

Craib’s exasperated sigh was audible to everyone in the room. “C’mon, man. You need to realize that if you speak so harshly, people are gonna be scared of you, what with your face.”

“I... I can’t help what’s on my face,” Godwald grumbled and then added, “and I’m doing my best.”

He turned to the woman.

“So? What’s the matter?” Godwald repeated.

“U-Um, Mr. Balgeuse sent me with documents, and... and tea and sweets, since there’s a child present. Those are outside...”

Balgeuse was as thoughtful as ever.

“That’s very kind of him,” Godwald said.

“Um... excuse me, but I’m not very fond of sweets...” Arcus spoke up, a guilty expression on his face.

“Oh? How unusual.”

Usually, kids of his age loved sweets. Godwald could probably count those he encountered who didn’t on a single hand.

“He’s a bit of a weird one,” Craib chipped in.

“He is indeed,” Noah agreed.

“I’m right here, you know...” Arcus smiled uncomfortably.

The woman placed the tea and snacks on the table before taking her leave. The four of them had a brief respite before Craib brought up the matter at hand.

“Now, about why we’re here...”

“Yes. I was wondering about that,” Godwald admitted.

“It’ll probably be faster if I showed you.”

Craib pulled out a glass tube encased in a wooden frame and set it on the table. Godwald eyed it curiously. It was too narrow to be a test tube, and in any case the tube was closed off, so you couldn’t pour anything into it. There were gradations etched into the wood, as if for measuring something. At the bottom of the tube sat a viscous red liquid.

This was something worthy of the secrecy of the Dark Room. There was no doubt it was big. Yet Godwald had no idea what it could be.

“What is it?” he asked outright.

“It’s a device which accurately measures aether, called an aethometer.”

“Sorry?”

The first thing Godwald felt was confusion, and initially he couldn’t find any meaning in Craib’s words. Craib grinned at him, as though the flummoxed look on his face was just what he hoped to see. Godwald quickly regained his senses.

“So... you say this thing measures aether?”

He’d never heard of anybody attempting such a thing. He knew there were magicians who attempted to make spells or seals which could measure aether, but they inevitably reached a point where it proved infeasible. Any research on such a thing was long considered to be a dead end. But now...

“Th-This isn’t some sort of joke, is it?” he asked quickly.

“Nope. It really works. See this red stuff down here? That’s what reacts to the aether,” Craib said.

“You mean it moves?”

“It expands,” clarified Craib. “It expands more the more aether it’s exposed to.”

“And you made this?”

“I helped. But it was this fella who came up with it.” Craib plonked his hand down on Arcus’s head next to him.

“Him?” Godwald gasped in astonishment. “He can’t be more than ten years

old!”

“I know! Pretty cool, right! I couldn’t believe it myself, either.” Craib let out his usual hearty laugh as Arcus showed a shy, wonky smile.

Godwald picked up the aethometer and tested it out by releasing a little aether. Sure enough, the liquid started to expand and make its way up the tube. The moment Godwald stopped, it began to contract before settling back at the bottom.

“It’s extremely sensitive, isn’t it?” he remarked.

“Yup. That’s what makes it super easy to use.”

At first, Godwald hadn’t believed it, but now that he’d seen it for himself, he was convinced. This device really could measure aether as Craib claimed.

“How far away does it work from?” he asked.

“Not that far. Its range is probably just a little shorter than this room,” Craib told him, as Arcus nodded in confirmation.

In that case, it probably wouldn’t work to measure the power of an opposing magician.

Despite that, however, it was nothing short of groundbreaking. Using it would greatly increase a magician’s understanding of their own magic. By cutting the time spent learning how much aether was used per spell, the standard of magic in Lainur would vastly improve, and magicians would be put on an even playing field. It was impossible to put into words just how much of an advantage this small object would bring, but there was one thing Godwald could say.

“This will bring untold benefit to our country.”

“Right?”

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Godwald asked. “You have every right to keep it to yourselves, after all.”

The aethometer would unlock one of magic’s greatest mysteries. There was precedent in Lainur that permitted a magician who created something like this to hide its existence without punishment. With it, Arcus could strengthen his own house, gain advantage over another, or even go on to found a new one of

his own.

“He’s already decided,” Craib spoke for him. “He said he wants to make it public and reap the rewards from it.”

“I see.”

How odd, thought Godwald, for a child of his age to be so materially concerned.

“Arcus Raytheft,” he addressed the boy. “What exactly do you hope to gain from announcing this creation of yours?”

“Money. And, if I may, I would like as much access to Lainur’s texts on aetheric studies as the state can afford to allow me.”

He was a magician through and through. Money and knowledge, the biggest twin desires of any magic-user. However, Godwald just couldn’t wrap his head around the boy’s age.

“Craib... you know, kids at this age usually just think about sweets and toys.”

“Yeah. I told ya he’s weird. Just one day, out of the blue, he asked me to teach him magic. Now he’s already makin’ his own spells!”

“Really?” Godwald gasped.

He felt a chill run down his spine. Creating your own spells was often one of the final tasks assigned to magicians studying at the Royal Institute before they could graduate. It wasn’t until after four long years of studying the Elder Tongue’s grammar and vocabulary and deepening their understanding and power over their aether that they were finally knowledgeable enough to create their own magic. Even then, there were students who fumbled it, and less than ten percent were able to come up with anything impressive. Was Craib really saying this young boy was at that level?

Godwald would expect such a thing of a gifted child of the royal family, but never of a boy like this, even if he was trained personally by a state magician.

“He must be an astounding young man if he created this on top of being able to craft his own spells.”

Magicians had been searching for a way to measure aether for years, and now

here was a young boy showing him the solution. If this was the level he was at now, just what would he be capable of as an adult?

Godwald turned his attention back to Arcus, studying his feminine, innocent features. He kept sipping his tea, as though nervous, and it was hard to believe there was a gifted brain behind those anxious eyes. Godwald looked at Craib.

“Have you reported this to His Majesty?”

“Nah, not yet. He’d just ask about all the boring stuff like ‘production goals’ and ‘contracts with third parties’ and stuff. I don’t even wanna think about what he’d say if we told him we hadn’t done any of that yet.”

Godwald could see his point. His Majesty very much favored those with actionable ends in mind. With no such plans, going to see him would doubtlessly result in a scolding.

“You don’t think he’ll complain now that you didn’t go to see him first?” Godwald asked, voicing his remaining doubt.

“Pfft. Probably. Dude’s got a staff up his butt, after all.”

Godwald suddenly realized that Arcus looked more stiff than before.

“U-Uncle,” he began, “are you sure it’s okay to be talking like that about the king?”

“Huh?” Craib blinked. “Oh. Right.”

In Lainur, as in other kingdoms, the king’s power and divinity was absolute. Speaking so lightly about him as Craib was definitely treasonous. That should have been common sense... but Craib, of course, was the kind of person to defy common sense.

“We’re friends, you know,” Craib explained. “We used to sneak out and run all over town.”

Craib began to tell tales of how he and the current king forged a strong friendship. Though he spoke proudly of their escapades, to Godwald it sounded like they were nothing but a pair of nuisances. Arcus, meanwhile, simply gaped at his uncle.

“Anyway. I guess we’ll drop in on him quickly,” Craib decided, bringing his

stories to an end.

“Sounds good. I’ll make some arrangements so that he’ll listen to you. How’s that?”

“Thanks. We’ll sort out all the researchy stuff. Once we’ve got an announce date sorted, we’ll rely on you to get all the formal preparations and legal stuff done.” Craib stood up.

“Aren’t you taking this with you?” Godwald asked Arcus, motioning toward the aethometer.

“You may keep it and use it, Guildmaster,” he replied.

“It’ll be a ‘thanks-for-seeing-us’ present.” Craib grinned.

“Very funny.” Though Godwald sighed, the excitement at getting to use the device was plain on his face. Just before the group left the room, he called out. “Abend.”

“Yeah?”

“For Crown and Country Evermore.”

“Right. For Crown and Country Evermore.”

With that, Craib left the room with his companions.

Citizen’s Plaza #3 was one of the plazas built in the early days of the capital’s construction. Unlike the central plaza, it wasn’t near the middle of the city. It was more like a park from the man’s world, and these recreational spaces were spread out through the capital.

Children ran around the center while housewives from the neighborhood chatted with each other. Meanwhile, elderly folk with too much time on their hands were bonding over a board game known as Battle Chess.

As usual, Arcus and Sue met up to study magic together. Having foregone their café, today they sat together on stone stools. They already finished studying and were now simply enjoying a light conversation. Before Arcus knew it, he was relaying his life story to Sue.

He explained how he was born to the viscount and was now learning magic under Craib. He didn't omit anything when it came to his disinheritance, of course. Sue didn't look like she knew how to react to that. Her dark-blue eyes narrowed and widened repeatedly, as though she wasn't sure whether she ought to be surprised or appalled.

"So you had the heirship stolen from you..."

"Yes, and not in the most pleasant way, either."

All Arcus could do now, as he looked back on those people's treatment of him, was sigh. In the man's world, they would surely have been arrested for child abuse. Nowadays, he tried his best to avoid them, but even if he ran into them, they couldn't do much with Noah around. They simply ignored each other's existence, though Arcus knew that didn't make everything okay. Sue frowned dubiously.

"You said they disinherited you 'cause your aether was weak, right? That's kinda weird..."

"I know. However, as far as they're concerned, my magical abilities simply had to live up to the Raytheft name, as is tradition."

"You seem fine at magic to me, though," Sue remarked.

She was right. From a normal perspective, his magical abilities were fine. There were even officials who were less powerful than him. Being able to use magic at all was impressive in this world. After all, theory and learning spells weren't enough if you couldn't control your aether or picture what you wanted your spell to do.

"The Raytheft bloodline is a small one compared to other noble families," Arcus explained.

"That sounds like a pain. It's not your fault your ancestors just happened to be good at magic."

"Yes... and now I have to work even harder because of it." Arcus sighed again. He hadn't meant for his life story to devolve into a series of complaints, but that was how it ended up.

“So why are you working so hard at magic?” Sue asked.

“Hm?”

“I mean, you’re not the heir anymore, right? So who cares if you’re good at magic anymore?”

“Ah.”

“If it was me, I’d hate magic forever! But you love it, right?”

Sue made perfect sense. Magic was the cause of all Arcus’s troubles, so he had every right to turn his back on it. In fact, it seemed like the most logical response.

“I want to become a famous magician... so I can show them up.” Though he felt a little self-conscious about it, Arcus told her the truth.

Sue let out a small giggle. “What are you, a kid?”

“Um... yes.” Arcus pouted a little, but Sue was still laughing.

“I’m sorry! You’re just so mature in other ways; I find it kinda funny.”

“Perhaps it’s not such a good reason, after all...”

It had been Arcus’s prime motivation all this time, even though he knew that revenge was never as satisfying as it seemed. He wanted to gain power so he could humiliate them. It was sort of twisted, now he thought about it. Was that really the kind of person he wanted to be? Wouldn’t that make him just as bad as his former parents? As Arcus’s mind raced, Sue’s expression suddenly hardened.

It was a solemn yet cool expression—the same one Arcus saw when they were up against the kidnapper.

“It’s a good reason,” she assured him. “Much better than losing hope and deciding to do nothing. Whatever your reason, you’re moving forward. You’re facing your problems. I mean, you coulda just run away.”

“Run away?” Arcus echoed.

“Yeah. You wouldn’t have to rely on your uncle, and you could get away from everyone you hate. But you didn’t, right? Instead, you worked to get stronger

so you could stand up to those people. That's super impressive!"

She had a point. Arcus didn't have to rebel against Joshua and Celine. He didn't have to work hard. He could have turned his back and taken the easy way out. Instead, he chose the path of strength, working to break down what everyone accepted as normal. While his reasons might be murky, the path itself was one of courage and progress.

"Is it really?" he murmured.

"Yeah!" Sue broke back into her usual smile. "I think there's more stuff you can do than just getting revenge on your parents, though!"

"Huh?"

"You gotta dream big!" she insisted.

What did she mean by *dream*?

"When you've had your revenge, what then? If you don't think about that, then you'll be totally lost when you've achieved your goal!"

"I see..."

Finally, Arcus understood what she meant. In other words, once he finished what he set out to do, he would burn out. She definitely had a point there. You often heard of people losing all direction in life once they finished what they set out to do. He remembered a particular friend of the man, who spent almost all his waking hours studying just to get into a certain national university. Once he was in, he deflated completely.

Who said the same couldn't happen to Arcus? His goal was borne out of resentment and frustration, which usually went hand in hand with that sort of outcome. If he put his heart and soul into his goal, then he would have neither left once he was done. What he needed in order to avoid that might just be another objective.

"Another objective..." It had to be something big. Something bigger than his current goal. "How about aiming to become a state magician?"

A state magician, just like his uncle. A hellishly difficult qualification that only eleven people in the entire country passed. If that wasn't big, Arcus didn't know

what was. Sue seemed to disagree, though.

“Hm... I dunno if that would really be enough,” she said.

“Are you being serious?” Arcus asked.

“Yeah. I think you could pass the exam right away.”

“N-No, I couldn’t!”

Where did she get that idea from? Didn’t she know just how difficult it was to become a state magician? Sue ignored his protests, as though she didn’t believe it up for debate.

“Life’s more fun when you set *huge* goals for yourself. I’m talking about something like becoming a general or one of the most highly-ranked nobles in all the land! Whaddya think?”

“Don’t be ridiculous...”

While a general might be an attainable position, a highly-ranked noble was certainly *not*. The current gentry either inherited their position, were granted it by the monarchy for a show of exceptional military might, or were royalty from other countries. To become one in a single generation would call for nothing short of a miraculous achievement or contribution to the state. While Arcus found it a most impossible goal, Sue seemed to have made up her mind.

“Yeah! It’s perfect! Now that’s a goal that’ll blow everyone’s mind! Go big or go home!”

“I think I’ll have more luck going home, thank you.”

Arcus’s words didn’t seem to have their intended effect of dissuading her.

“Don’t worry! I know how amazing you are based on my own life experience!”

“Your life experience, which doesn’t even amount to a year more than mine?”

Arcus only recently learned that Sue was older than him, and ever since, she used her superior age against him now and then.

“Nearly a year is a long time,” she said stubbornly.

Arcus found himself getting a little indignant.

“Anyway. That’s the kinda lofty goal I think you should aim for!”

“Very well. I’ll do my best.”

“Yup! Don’t worry, either, ’cause you’ll have me to cheer you on!”

Her words sparked a small fire of confidence within him. This was a part of her personality that he found very encouraging. Even though he had no idea how to go about achieving this new goal of his, she made him feel like he would figure it out eventually without having to try too hard.

“Now, if you wanna make it big, you gotta take every opportunity! Every single one. Be greedy, okay?!”

“Those don’t sound like the words of an eight-year-old.”

“Um, hello?! I’m nearly *nine*, you know!”

“Sorry, ma’am. Anyway, what about you?”

“What about me?”

“Don’t you have any plans for the future?”

“Of course.”

“For example?”

“Well, I—” Suddenly Sue’s expression hardened again. “I want to make this country strong. Strong enough to overpower anyone who opposes it.”

“What?”

“The Empire’s always looking down on us. Not just the Empire, either. The tribes who live in the Cross Mountains to the east and the country along the southern coast... As soon as we overstep our boundaries, they threaten to strike us down, undermining our power. They’re trying to provoke a war, rousing nobles and independent rulers to rise up from within our borders! So, I...”

There was a strong determination in her voice. She wasn’t just speaking wistfully. This was something she was clearly passionate about. Arcus was sure now. She must have been from a noble family; otherwise, she wouldn’t be speaking like this.

She was only eight years old, after all. There were tons of adults not half as ambitious as this. Perhaps Sue really was more mature than Arcus gave her credit for. Her patriotism seemed to burn stronger than any flame. She wasn't satisfied with the status quo, and the only solution was to rise up and—

“Just kidding!”

“You sound like you've been through a lot. You must think we're severely oppressed by those other countries to talk about ours becoming stronger.”

“Been through a lot?” Sue echoed thoughtfully. “I don't... I don't *think* I have...”

How odd. Arcus couldn't see where her earlier words had come from, if not from experiencing hardship. She wanted to make the country stronger so that it wouldn't be swallowed up by its neighbors. Suddenly, Arcus remembered something.

“Oh, I have something for you.” He pulled an aethometer out of his bag.

“What's this?” Sue asked.

“What do you think it is?” Arcus countered with a sly smile. If she really was so much more experienced than him at almost nine years old, *maybe* she could work it out.

Sue spent her time studying the device, turning it this way and that, and inspecting every angle.

“This tube looks like the perfect size for sticking up your butt, if only it could come out of this frame.”

“I beg your pardon?!”

Just what went on in this little girl's head, and why did it have anything to do with something so dangerous as sticking a glass tube up one's rear? Arcus was at a loss.

“Huh? What is it, then?” asked Sue.

“It's a device to measure aether,” Arcus explained. “An aethometer. Don't tell me you're not impressed?”

Sue stared blankly at him. Then, she froze.

“It measures aether,” Arcus prompted.

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Whaaat?! Arcus! Where did you get this?!”

“I made it.”

“You *made* it?!”

Sue stared at the aethometer wide-eyed, as if it had sprouted wings or something. Arcus was long used to that expression on people’s faces by now. He held his hand over the aethometer.

“Watch,” he told her. “I’m releasing aether right now.”

“Whoa! The red stuff inside is moving!”

“This is as much aether as it takes to use psychokinesis. 10 mana, to be precise. Mana is the unit used to measure aether.”

“That’s so cool!”

Sue lit up brighter than a kid in a candy store. In this case, Arcus couldn’t blame her for her reaction. He was sure he would react in the same way. Just then, there was a needy glint in her eye. It looked like she wanted to keep it. She was starting to fidget now. Arcus had never seen her like this before.

“Sorry, but...”

“Come on! Please! Can I have it? Please, please, please!”

She didn’t even let him finish his sentence before throwing a tantrum. What was it that Arcus was thinking earlier about her being mature for her age?

“I’m sorry,” Arcus repeated, “but I can’t give this to you.”

“That’s not fair! How come you’re dangling it in my face, then?!”

“Because if I didn’t tell you about it now, you’d complain when you finally found out about it.”

“Duh!”

“Ugh. Sometimes I just don’t know what to do with you.”

“Well, first, you should give that to me! C’mon! I should have it; I’m the elder

child!”

“I already told you I can’t do that!”

“But why, though?!”

“Because I’m planning to unveil this to the public. I can’t just go handing them out before that.”

“Oh, right...” Sue cleared her throat. “You’ll need that to go well for your huge ambitions, I guess.”

At least she had settled down, despite her weird sense of logic. Or so Arcus thought, but she still had an awfully tight grip on the aethometer. He gave it an experimental pull, only to lift her hand up along with it. Arcus gave her the hardest stare he could muster, which she responded to with a cheeky grin.

“I need that back.”

“Aww, but—”

“It’s just until I make the announcement. Until then, you can use it when I’m with you.” Arcus offered her a compromise.

“Really?! Yippee! You’re the best!”

The next moment, Sue barreled into Arcus’s chest. She must really love magic.

“So squishy!”

“Not again...”

Once again, she contented herself by poking at his cheeks.

Part 2: Faltering Footsteps

It had been two years since Arcus developed the aethometer. Despite that, he still had yet to make his invention public.

There was so much to do. It had to go through rigorous testing, and there was no end in sight to the search for a discreet space to begin manufacturing. Godwald and Sue were still the last people Arcus told about its existence.

The production process itself was probably the biggest obstacle. The tempered aether required for each device posed a frightful drain on Arcus's time and energy; he hadn't decided whether he was going to announce *that* discovery yet either. The road ahead would be long and arduous.

Since there was still so much Arcus didn't know about tempered aether, he was leaning toward keeping it to himself, as was his legal right. Of course, this meant he would be the only one capable of creating aethometers, but he considered that a plus. The fewer that were produced, the easier it would be to manage their production.

Arcus was now ten years old. While he had grown over the past two years, he was still shorter than other children his age and a little on the lanky side. However, in this world, height and bulk didn't directly correspond to one's physical capabilities, and the fact remained that Arcus was much fitter than most other ten-year-olds. This was all thanks to his daily training. At this rate, he would end up being just as strong as Craib, though probably without all the thick muscle to go with it.

Even after two years, his relationship with Lecia was good. They met less often than before because of her intense noble education, but they played together whenever they both had the time.

Due to that very education, Lecia's intelligence had flourished, and her speech was eloquent and fluent. Arcus couldn't remember seeing any children, boy or girl, at this level of maturity in the man's world, and it was likely due to the environment they grew up in. Noble children were expected to become mature

adults as soon as possible, and their quick growth reflected this.

Arcus's relationship with Sue, too, was as strong as ever. They met up several times a week to study magic or hang out around the city. Access to the aethometer expedited their studies, and they had greatly deepened their grasp of the Elder Tongue. Thankfully, Sue wasn't being as touchy-feely with Arcus anymore. She had also become just a little more formal, which was also probably due to her growing up. Her obsession with his cheeks, however, remained unchanged.



There was something else that had changed too, and that was Arcus's manner of speech. He was beginning to ease out of the rigid, formal diction Joshua and Celine had drilled into him. Noah had this to say on the change:

"I must say, I'm not quite used to you speaking so casually just yet..."

In fact, his servant commented on his speech rather a lot. Personally, Arcus thought it quite rude.

"Your looks are just a little too... *soft* to be speaking in such an unrefined manner," was surely what Noah meant by his words.

While Arcus was still self-conscious of his face, he had long since moved past the hope that he could do anything about it. All he could do was leave it to the passage of time to sort him out.

Today, Arcus was being made to run laps around Craib's garden.

"C'mon, Arcus! I know you can do better than that! Pick up the pace!"

"R-Right!"

"You gotta make sure your physical strength can keep up with your magical strength!"

The coach yelling at him, of course, was none other than his uncle Craib. He had volunteered himself to watch over his nephew's exercise, and part of that was supplying plenty of "encouragement."

While it may seem strange for a magician to have need of raw physical grit, the reason was quite simple. Arcus possessed just a little more aether than the average magic user. As Craib pointed out, however, this meant that there were still plenty of magicians out there who surpassed his capacity. Though they never directly compared, Arcus reckoned he had about a fourth of Lecia's aether and a fifth of Craib's. He didn't even want to think about how he would compare to Sue, who he couldn't be sure was even human. These were just a handful of people among the many magicians in the world, but there were doubtless many more of them whose aether excelled against Arcus's.

To close the gap between those superior magicians and himself, he needed an

edge to bring to bear; hence, strength training. At ten years old, his body was finally able to handle it.

Or so he thought, but that was before he reckoned with his uncle's intense "observation." Arcus wasn't sure whether it was the military influence or not, but the moment he showed any sort of weakness, Craib would just add more exercises to his training regime. There was a reason his uncle was so well-built. In fact, Arcus had been exercising his body more than his magic lately.

Continuing to run despite his lack of breath, Arcus found himself starting to get nauseous. He heard that children in this world were much more resilient than in the man's world. This level of exercise shouldn't do him any long-term harm. Despite that, and thanks to the influences of his dream, he couldn't help but feel that he should have been filing an abuse claim to someone about this.

Finally reaching his breaking point, Arcus came to a stop, resting his hands on his knees. This did not go unnoticed by Craib.

"I told ya not to stop! That's it! Another lap, even if it kills you... In fact, run as though you're *tryin'* to die!"

"R-Right." Still gasping for breath, Arcus set off once more on unsteady feet.

He saw demons in the man's world who were less terrifying than his uncle right now. In fact, Joshua was less terrifying than this man, although at least Craib didn't lay a finger on Arcus.

Eventually, Craib's intense regime for that day came to an end. Arcus could barely remain on his feet.

"Good job! That'll do for today."

"Th-Thanks..." Arcus gasped.

"Arcus." Craib's voice softened. "If this is all it takes to wear you out, you'll never be able to hack becoming a state magician. You gotta keep going and building your strength like this, okay?"

"Okay..."

Arcus already knew how high the standards to become a state magician were, but this was ridiculous... He would at least like his uncle to remember that he

was only ten years old. He knew him well enough to know that was a pipe dream, though.

This wasn't the full extent of it. Craib decided that Arcus also needed a basic knowledge of physical combat skills, and so he was helping him train in swordplay, archery, and horseback riding.

To be honest, Arcus underestimated just how difficult things would be. He didn't think his uncle would put him through so much. He expected the training to last just three or four hours a day, but the time it actually took would constitute a human rights violation in the man's world.

Noah mentioned that this sort of intense training was rare, even for noble families, but that was putting it mildly. Even princes and princesses would quake at the sort of things Arcus went through. Arcus was starting to wonder whether he would even grow old enough to get the revenge he sought on those who birthed him.

He also trained daily by himself, so on those days that Craib put him through his paces, the entire day would be spent on his physical strength. Though it was tough, he didn't want to give up his daily training; there were specific things he wanted to work on, and he was reluctant to carry out that training in front of Craib or Noah, and so it ended up as a separate exercise.

That private training consisted of techniques he learned from the man's world, but neither Craib nor Noah really approved of them, since they differed from the nation's style of rapier fencing.

I don't think there's any harm in it personally...

He already knew how to avoid those techniques conflicting with the national style of fencing, thanks to what he saw in his dream. Besides, all he was really practicing was how to move with a wider stance, which shouldn't affect things too much. It was a technique where he kept his upper body still, using the soles of his feet to move.

With one foot in front and one behind him, he would jump off his back foot to close the space between him and his opponent. After that, he would focus on the twisting of his waist and turn to the side, changing his position in an instant.

Again and again he repeated this move, determined to commit it to his muscle memory. As usual, he wasn't practicing this specific move without reason.

If I combine this technique with that other one from the national style, I should be able to pull it off.

He had a certain move in mind. The most vital step to making it work was to keep his upper body as still as possible. With those two techniques combined along with the difference in human bodies between worlds, he should be able to pull off what only heroes in books managed in the man's world—at least in theory.

He had no time to rest. If he took even a single day off, he would never manage the move. He had to learn it: the move that the man could only dream of.

Arcus continued to juggle all these separate arts, making slow but steady progress.

One day, Joshua and Celine Raytheft took their daughter Lecia to a certain noble household. It was a large, four-story mansion situated in one corner of an upper-class district in the capital, complete with a tower. The garden gave the capital's central plaza a run for its money in terms of size.

While the Raytheft family had an honorable and established place in Lainur's history, their financial power was nothing compared to this place.

This estate belonged to the Marquess Cau Gaston. He worked in financial affairs, combining a noble peerage with a high-ranking official role.

Lecia stared up at the huge mansion in wonder.

"Big, isn't it?" Joshua chimed in. "It belongs to His Lordship, Cau Gaston, who is thought to be the richest noble in all the kingdom."

Lecia gave her expected response. "Yes, Father."

"Now make sure you keep your eyes open and pay attention."

It was the same instruction her father gave her every time they visited a new

estate. He wasn't just talking about any magic that would be on display, but also the way that different nobles lived and conducted themselves. Lately, the number of these visits was increasing. Joshua said it was important to make yourself known and introduce yourself to others. Dinner parties for friends, courteous visits, magical salons for the upper noble ranks... By making her attend these things, Joshua was making it known that Lecia was the official Raytheft heir.

That was precisely why they came to visit the marquess today. Although he belonged to a different faction than the Raythefts, his territory lay close to theirs, and so the Raythefts wanted to keep their relationship a good one through frequent visits.

Tonight, the marquess was holding a large party. For Joshua, it was the perfect opportunity to show off the Raythefts' heir. Lecia was dressed up in a high-quality dress reserved for just such occasions, and more care had been taken over her appearance than usual today. Her father was also fully dressed in formal attire, and her mother was attending too. He told her that this event was important enough for the entire family to show up. "Entire family" meaning, of course, everybody but her brother.

Her brother... As usual for these kinds of events, he was left at the estate. Lecia's parents were kind only to her. Ever since his disinheritance, they took out all their anger on him, while she was treated much more favorably than he was before. With each passing day, their treatment of him worsened as they doted on Lecia more and more.

It made Lecia feel terrible. Surely her brother longed for their parents to love him like they did before. Every time they referred to her as the heir, she was reminded of what she stole from him.

I'm sorry...

"Come on, Lecia," Joshua called.

"Yes, Father."

"Many of the guests tonight have deep, storied bonds with the Raythefts. Behave yourself as well as you can, and be sure to remember their faces."

“Yes, Father.” Lecia nodded.

Joshua smiled warmly at her. She wished he were capable of smiling like that to Arcus.

“Lecia. You are our eldest child. Make sure you conduct yourself as the next head of the household should.”

“Yes, Father...”

Her mother’s words were firm but gentle and made no mention of her brother.

It wasn’t long until a butler showed them to the reception hall. The carpet was entwined with golden thread; large Sol Glass chandeliers hung from the ceiling. Paintings by famous artists lined the walls, and exotic foods of all kinds were piled high on the tables.

Such an extravagant display was rare, even among high-ranking nobles. Every last inch of the room sparkled so brightly that Lecia found herself squinting. The room was already filled with aristocrats in the heat of conversation.

“Joshua.”

Lecia turned to see who called her father. It was a man whose dark hair was streaked with gray. His frame was slender yet sturdy, and he walked with the gait of a man at least twenty years younger. Gaudy medals stood at attention along the chest of his mostly-white jacket. An expensive-looking rapier hung from his hip.

“My Lord,” Joshua greeted him.

It was the Count Purce Cremelia. The Cremelias were also a military family, with the Raythefts directly beneath them in the hierarchy. The count was also a general in the armed forces.

Count Cremelia was the highest-ranking noble in the east, and as such took command of all those below him when the area faced an emergency. With their territory in the east, the Raythefts also fell under his command, and Joshua was one of three viscounts who supported the count.

As Joshua bowed, Lecia and her mother curtsied. The count gave them a

friendly smile.

“You are as pretty as a flower. Much more beautiful than any jewel,” he told Lecia, but she already knew it was the least he was obliged to say. His interests lay more in conflict and fighting strength, after all.

“Is His Lordship yet to arrive?” Joshua asked, referring to the marquess.

“It seems so. It appears he has something up his sleeve. My daughter and I are waiting eagerly as well.”

His daughter, Charlotte Cremelia, appeared next to him. Her hair was a golden brown, and her beautiful features seemed to have been carved by a skilled dollmaker. In her immaculate white gown, she gave off an air of nobility identical to her father’s.

Picking up her skirt, she gave a graceful curtsy. After greeting Joshua, she approached Lecia, and they exchanged pleasantries.

The two of them had met before when the Raythefts had called upon the Cremelias, or the count threw a magic salon. They often spoke at these events, too, and as Charlotte was older than Lecia, she addressed the younger girl much more casually than Lecia herself would be permitted.

Charlotte surveyed the room like she was looking for someone.

“Where is Arcus, Lecia?” she asked.

“My brother is not in attendance.”

“Oh. Might it be that the rumors are true?”

“They are.”

Rumors of Arcus’s disinheritance had spread ever since Lecia began attending these kinds of events. She hated talking about it, but such treatment of one’s children wasn’t unheard among families like theirs. If the heir wasn’t good enough, they were simply replaced, with the next in line set to take over the family and its territory. Heirs needed to be talented, after all.

Personally, however, Lecia thought her brother *was* talented, thank you very much. Not to mention hardworking.

“My Lord. If I may...”

“What is it, Joshua?”

“I would like to officially annul the arrangement between our son and Your Lordship’s daughter.”

“You mean their engagement?”

“Yes, My Lord.”

Joshua and Purce had arranged for Arcus and Charlotte to marry the moment Arcus was born. The two of them had yet to meet, however, and now it was likely they never would. Purce’s expression hardened ever so slightly.

“Do you not think the decision to expel your son was made in haste? I understand he failed to meet your expectations, but that does not mean he lacks potential as a magician.”

“I’m afraid I must disagree, My Lord. His aether is simply not sufficient to be worthy of the Raytheft name.”

“A matter of tradition, is it?”

“Indeed. As Your Lordship knows, we are a military family, and therefore our heir must conform to a certain standard. We cannot risk him causing problems for Your Lordship, either.”

The count let out a small sigh. “This all sounds very familiar to me, you know.”

“M-My Lord...”

“Pardon my outburst. I have never known a more successful head of the Raytheft house than you. You did much to help us suppress the Hans during the Battle of Jars, too.”

“Thank you, My Lord.”

Though Joshua thanked Purce, it seemed he wasn’t finished speaking about their arrangement just yet.

“However, I do not wish to put Your Lordship and the countess in an awkward position, and so I would like to call off the engagement.”

“Hmm...”

The count looked at him thoughtfully, as though a little taken aback by Joshua's stubbornness on the matter. If Lecia's parents were to be believed, Arcus's lack of aether was contagious.

However, aside from the fact that it didn't make him talentless, one's aether was something set in stone. Lecia wished her parents would just open their eyes to that simple truth. Her brother's words on the matter were too rude to be repeated, and he suggested they wrap themselves in—to soften the phrasing somewhat—some sort of protective magic if they were worried about that kind of thing. Lecia noted that her brother wasn't nearly as polite as he used to be.

"Father. Let us do as he wishes."

"Charlotte?"

It seemed she was in favor of calling off the engagement. Lecia wasn't surprised; she wouldn't want her husband to be chosen for her either, even if it was standard practice for nobles. Especially if that husband was the subject of so many harmful rumors. Joshua took the chance to double down.

"It was something agreed between Your Lordship and myself," he said. "However, if Your Lordship's daughter is also opposed to the idea, then I would like Your Lordship to take that into consideration if at all possible."

"I would certainly prefer my daughter to marry a man with talent. However, I have heard that your son is currently under the guidance of 'Crucible' Abend."

"That was... my brother's prerogative."

"Is that right?"

"Yes, my Lord. He simply sympathizes with my son on account of his own lack of aether. I am sure my son will gain no benefit from it."

The count narrowed his eyes at Joshua's unwillingness to negotiate.

Fortunately, the awkward silence in the air was not to last.

"My, my. It seems everybody has arrived!" A voice resounded out from the center of the elevated stage at one end of the reception room. Everybody cheered when they noticed the source of that voice: a certain middle-aged man.

It was none other than Marquess Gaston himself, the host of this party. Almost every inch of his formal suit was covered in golden decorations, which was only amplified by the fact that he was so tall.

He exuded pure confidence as he strode through the crowd, making sure he was in full view of every last guest as he twiddled his handlebar mustache. Greeting everyone along the way, he eventually reached the Raythefts.

“My Lord,” Purce began, “This is such a wonderful evening, and Your Lordship is so generous for extending us an invitation.”

“It’s good to see you, Count Cremelia! I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself!” Gaston responded with a grin, his fingers still on his mustache.

Now it was Joshua’s turn.

“Your Most Honorable Lordship, we are extremely delighted to have received an invitation.”

“Do not worry about it. I always like to keep good relations with the eastern houses. Please enjoy yourself tonight.”

“My Lord.” Joshua lowered his head.

Lecia suddenly realized that while her father seemed to shrink back in the presence of the marquess, the marquess was calm and collected. She blinked in curiosity as Charlotte whispered in her ear.

“There are all sorts of unsavory rumors about the marquess.”

“Is that so?”

“Indeed. For example, that his gains are ill-gotten, and that he does not rule his people kindly.”

It was a common tale. Thanks to the current king’s efforts, corruption amongst nobles had decreased greatly, but beyond a certain rank, there was only so much the king could do.

“Father is awfully wary of him,” Charlotte remarked.

“Yet you still came to this event?”

“Keeping up relations is important.”

It seemed the count and his daughter didn't hold the marquess in high regard, but thanks to their status, it was difficult for them to make their views public.

"It seems you young ladies get along nicely."

At the marquess's greeting, Charlotte and Lecia gave a polite curtsy.

The following evening, Lecia rushed to Arcus's room.

Usually, it was difficult for her to find an opportunity to see him, but she managed to sneak off today. Her father had been called away by Count Cremelia, likely to discuss their relationship with Marquess Gaston moving forward. Her mother was at another noble house for a tea party, and so there was nobody to tell Lecia off for going to see her brother. Lately the servants of the house had been turning a blind eye to their relationship, despite the fact that their opinion of Arcus hadn't changed.

Lecia arrived at Arcus's room to find him sitting cross-legged in the middle of the floor. It was a position she found him in often these days. Usually, he'd be so busy with studying or practicing fencing that it was rare to see him still like this, but it seemed he was starting to make it a habit. Lecia couldn't help but wonder what he was trying to achieve by it.

Just then, Arcus, who was facing the window, looked over his shoulder at her.

"What's up, Lecia?"

"Indeed. There is something I wish to discuss with you."

"Sure, that's fine." Arcus blinked at her curiously but accepted her request.

Although she felt guilty about it, Lecia couldn't help but feel that Arcus's new casual way of speaking was an attempt to sound more masculine than he looked. If she wasn't mistaken, he was trying to lower his voice a little, too.

He still had the delicate features and pale skin of their mother. His silver hair was as curly and fluffy as Lecia's, and when he smiled, the word "adorable" came to mind more quickly than anything else. Maybe she just needed to get used to his new way of speaking, she thought, but she worried about how long that might take.

Before carrying on, Lecia quickly looked left and right, checking their surroundings. It didn't look like there was anyone around, but she decided to ask just in case.

"Is Noah with you?"

"I sent him out on an errand," Arcus replied.

Good, thought Lecia.

Arcus shuffled around until he was facing her. Lecia settled herself down in front of him and showed him what she had with her.

"When we attended Marquess Gaston's party the other evening, a servant handed me this. Well, they were *dressed* like a servant, at least..."

"Dressed like a servant?" Arcus echoed in confusion.

As the party wore on, the nobles indulged more and more in expensive wine and delicacies. They got drunker and drunker, and louder and louder, and Charlotte and Lecia were tired of having to greet stranger after stranger. Wanting a break from it all, the two headed to the balcony to get some fresh air and finish up the punch they brought out with them.

Although Lecia was used to attending these gatherings by now, she hated it when the adults got too drunk. Even the most elegant and refined nobles lost control of themselves when alcohol was involved.

This party was the worst she had seen for that sort of thing, probably because the drinks the marquess served were really something else. Even out here, the two girls could hear the boisterous voices of the drunken aristocrats. Any child would have tired of the atmosphere that night.

Her parents, of course, were not in such a wild state. They understood the poor influence such an environment would have on their child, and so they allowed Lecia and her friend to clear out.

Charlotte sighed, apparently just as fed up with the ruckus as Lecia herself.

"Mother and Father are always saying how important these things are," Lecia began doubtfully, "but it seems all so curious to me."

That thought was on her mind from the moment they arrived. The start of the evening hadn't been so bad, but once things got started, it seemed that nobody had any limits anymore. There was no end to the indulgence. No boundaries to the unscrupulous uproar. Was this really how nobles were supposed to behave? Just watching them filled Lecia with disgust.

"I completely agree. I cannot imagine being one of this kingdom's subjects and realizing this is how your taxes are used by that man..."

"The marquess?" Lecia prompted.

"Indeed. The corrupt marquess..."

If this frivolous lifestyle was borne from ill-gotten gains, Lecia failed to see how it was cause for such celebration.

In exchange for their social and official status, nobles were required to keep their people happy during peacetime and to take to the battlefield during wartime.

Yet now it seemed they forgot their responsibilities and had fallen down into the pits of disgrace.

"They are nothing short of farmyard animals," Charlotte muttered coolly.

From here, the cheers of the nobles sounded like the oinking of pigs and lowing of cows. As the well-disciplined daughter of a martial family, it was no wonder that Charlotte found it unbearable. Lecia turned to look at her.

The young girl sat in her garden chair, and Lecia had to admit that she was absolutely beautiful. Although there was an air of gloom around her, it only seemed to highlight her attractive features. Her movements had a graceful elegance to them, likely due to her upbringing, and she reminded Lecia very much of "Jacqueline by the Window Side" from the Ancient Chronicles. Her white dress suited her perfectly and gave off an ethereal impression.

Just as the two were starting to relax, Charlotte spoke up.

"Lecia," she began, "what is Arcus like?"

"Arcus?" Lecia echoed.

"Yes. We have never met, so I find myself curious."

Charlotte looked a little uncomfortable, and Lecia could tell she was trembling slightly from the way her golden-brown hair shook. Perhaps it was the exhaustion of the evening. Usually she was much more cheerful and gentle than this.

“My brother is an amazing person,” Lecia began. “As His Lordship mentioned, he is studying magic under our uncle, who is a state magician. Although I am also studying magic, I am nowhere near as skilled as he.”

Though Lecia and Arcus had never compared their magic, she was sure that their skills were worlds apart. She couldn’t just come out and explicitly say that her brother was a magical genius for fear of appearing biased. However, she was sure he was able to use a much greater variety of magic than her.

Charlotte’s eyes lit up with admiration for a split second before cloudiness returned to them.

“So he’s hardworking,” she finally concluded. It didn’t seem like that was enough to capture her interest.

It seemed she didn’t have any other remarks to make. Lecia wasn’t surprised. Charlotte likely met “hardworking” people on a daily basis. The Cremelia house was head of the national art of rapier fencing and so took on a great number of pupils. Charlotte would have been surrounded by these pupils practicing hard day and night in the family’s training halls.

“What kind of man would you be interested in?” Lecia asked her friend.

“One who is strong,” she replied after a thoughtful pause. “At the very least, I cannot abide a gentleman who is scrawny and pale-faced.”

“Scrawny...”

Lecia pictured Arcus. While she wouldn’t go so far as to call him “wimpy,” he was small and much more feminine-looking than other boys his age. Perhaps to some women, that would count as “scrawny.”

“How is Arcus in that regard?” Charlotte prompted.

“His physique is... similar to mine,” Lecia admitted.

“I see.”

Charlotte didn't attempt to hide the disappointment in her sigh. Apparently she was looking for somebody sturdier. Those were the kind of men she was used to in her family, so maybe that was where her preferences came from.

Lecia had to admit that she was relieved at Charlotte's disinterest. She didn't want Arcus to leave the estate forever.

At that pause in their conversation, the pair spotted a servant in the hallway leading up to the balcony. He was a slender man with an unhealthy pallor to his face. There were shadows under his eyes, and he gave off a rather gloomy impression, not to mention that the way he kept checking his surroundings was pretty suspect.

Lecia frowned as he approached them.

Who is he? she wondered. *He seems far too suspicious to be a servant.*

As she stiffened, he gave a quick bow before getting even closer. "I beg your pardon. I am from the Royal Ministry of Justice. I apologize for the sudden intrusion, but I wonder whether I might ask you to hold on to this for a spell."

Lecia simply stared at him as he held out a black bag toward her. Though she and Charlotte were too shocked to do anything, the man seemed to be impatient as he continued to look this way and that. Whoever he was, it was clear he did not want to be caught. It was Charlotte who broke the silence first.

"Why, how very rude of you!" she exclaimed. "Coming up here and asking such a thing of two young noble ladies without even offering your name or adequately identifying yourself."

Her words were much more intimidating than they had any right to be at her age, which was no doubt due to the environment she grew up in. The man bowed his head even deeper.

"I understand just how unacceptable this is. However, I really must insist that you take this. Please..."

He was clearly getting desperate. Charlotte shot Lecia a questioning look as though waiting for her reaction.

The pleading tone of the man's hushed whispers and his suspicious

movements suggested he was acting out of desperation. Was he being chased?

“What is this?” she asked.

“Evidence,” he replied quietly, “evidence of Marquess Gaston’s corruption.”

“C-Corruption?!” Lecia gasped, forgetting to keep her voice down. “But why should you want to give something like that to me?”

“I was sent here to uncover the marquess’s misdeeds,” he explained.

“However, I am ashamed to admit I have aroused his suspicion, and now he is keeping a careful eye on me.”

“You mean to say that you are anxious he might take this evidence back?”

“That’s right. But if you take it, even temporarily, he will no longer be able to get his hands on it.”

It made sense: entrusting the evidence to one of the guests would allow it to leave the estate safely. At the very least, it would prevent Gaston from destroying it.

“Please,” the man repeated, “do it for the kingdom.”

“I am not sure I can agree to this,” Lecia said. “Please allow me to speak with my father before making a decision.”

“I’m sorry, but I would ask that you do not speak of this to Lord Raytheft. The existence of this evidence needs to be kept a secret until the right time.” The man bowed imploringly again.

It was clear from his behavior that he believed this to be his only chance. On the one hand, argued Lecia to herself, all she would be doing is holding on to it for him. On the other, she didn’t want to cause any unnecessary strife, especially if that might end up involving her parents or brother.

And yet, this evidence was clearly important. She couldn’t just leave it be, and this man had risked his life for the kingdom to get a hold of it, too. By refusing now, she would be ensuring that his valiant efforts were all for naught. Simply by holding on to it, she could help to rid the kingdom of one of its parasites.

“Very well. I shall take it.”

“Thank you!” the man gasped with joyful relief, handing the black bag over to Lecia.

“Is there anything I ought to do with it?” Lecia asked.

“When the time is right, I shall come to retrieve it. Until then, please keep it safely at the estate. Thank you.”

The man hurried away without Lecia ever learning who he really was. For a while she stared after him blankly, before the curiosity of what was inside the bag overtook her. She still wasn’t sure he hadn’t played her for a fool, but when she looked, she found it was filled with documents. She showed Charlotte, whose expression stiffened once she realized her suspicions about Marquess Gaston were right on the money.

“Are you sure about this, Lecia?” she asked anxiously.

“Yes.”

Lecia wasn’t sure she had done the *right* thing necessarily, but she was certain she at least hadn’t done the wrong thing, however much it worried her to have such important documents in her possession.

“Shall I take it?” Charlotte offered, sensing her friend’s unease.

“N-No, Charlotte, it’s quite alright. I am the one he gave it to, after all. He is expecting me to have it, and it wouldn’t do to confuse him when he comes to retrieve it. I wouldn’t want to inconvenience your father, either.”

“Are you absolutely sure?”

“Yes,” Lecia repeated, giving a determined nod. Unfortunately, however, the unease in her heart would only grow with time.

Arcus was silent after hearing Lecia recount the details of her encounter, but the surprise was clear on his face. She showed him the contents of the bag, since at first he seemed as skeptical as she had been.

Arcus pulled out a few of the documents to study. Even if Lecia herself didn’t understand them, perhaps her brother would. She watched as his expression darkened. Lecia decided he might even know the meaning of the item right at

the bottom of the bag, which she dug out now.

“There is this, too.”

“A ledger?” Arcus’s frown deepened. “Is this for his finances, do you think? Wait, so he’s been fiddling with his accounts? Damn...”

All of a sudden, Arcus let out an uncharacteristic shriek, his eyes wide with shock. “Why the heck would someone give this to a kid?”

“Is it really that significant?” Lecia asked.

“This is some serious evidence,” Arcus confirmed. “I can’t believe he’d trust someone so young with this.”

“He did seem to be in quite the hurry. I’m sure he was desperate,” Lecia said.

Arcus grumbled under his breath as he studied the book, eventually letting out a deep sigh.

“Did you tell your dad about this?”

“Not yet. I wasn’t sure if I should,” Lecia admitted. “This might all be forged, after all.”

“True...”

She didn’t want to make such a bold move without being able to verify it.

“The man at the party asked me not to tell Father, either.”

“What did he say exactly?” Arcus asked.

“His exact words were: ‘I would ask that you do not speak of this to Lord Raytheft.’”

Arcus didn’t respond. It looked like he was deep in thought.

“What’s the matter, Brother?”

“I don’t think you can just leave this alone. But I’m also not sure about telling your parents...”

“Me neither. Since he asked me specifically not to, I’m not entirely sure it would be wise.”

Again, Arcus fell into silence. This time, he closed his eyes thoughtfully. Lecia

waited patiently. It took a while for him to open them again, but once he did, those crimson eyes looked at her calmly.

“What do you wanna do, Lecia?”

“Me?”

“Yeah. I wanna know that before I say anything else.”

“I believe I should hold on to it.”

“How come? You don’t have a reason to, right?”

He wasn’t wrong. Technically, she didn’t have any responsibility or obligation over these items. However...

“Brother. I have been taught that high-ranking nobles should not only be proud of their status but should act in a manner befitting it. We have a duty to protect the citizens beneath us and to keep to the laws of this kingdom as an example to them. As long as what I have been taught is right, I believe the correct course of action here is to hold on to that evidence.”

“So this is all because of your sense of justice? You know this could be dangerous, right?”

“Yes. As a noble, I could not simply turn a blind eye.”

That was what she learned from their father: to always remember her pride as an aristocrat and use it to lead her on the right path. That was why she decided to cooperate with that member of the Royal Ministry of Justice. If there was even a chance of this evidence being real, she had to take it, else she would no longer be able to call herself a noble.

Arcus sighed. “I’ll take it, okay?”

“Pardon?”

“It’s safer that way. If you kept it in your room, someone might find it.”

“Oh...”

He was right. If a servant happened to come across it while cleaning her room, they may well report it to her parents. Not to mention the risk of her parents finding it themselves. Meanwhile, barely anybody set foot in Arcus’s

room, so the risk of discovery was much lower here. It was the safest place for it.

“If that guy comes for it, you just gotta let me know.”

“Very well.”

With that, Lecia excused herself from the room. Having shared her burden with someone she trusted, she felt just a little more at ease than before.

Lainur’s nobles were a privileged class of people whose positions and territory were protected, and in some cases granted, by the king. Society was obligated to recognize their “superior” lineage, as well as that of their offspring, but because of the gap between them and the average person, prejudice was largely tolerated.

Though their exact duties varied from fiefdom to fiefdom, nobles were generally obligated to take care of their own jurisdiction while helping out with the official, financial, or military affairs of the state.

Martial families were, of course, expected to carry out important military duties. Some joined the king’s guard or the armed forces at a high rank. Some who held remote land bordering neighboring countries were obligated to put their private armies to use in cases of national emergency. Craib was the former kind of noble. Count Cremelia was the latter.

As for the Raythefts, their family had been granted their own territory near the count’s after supporting his family for generations. It was for this reason that Joshua could also be placed in the latter category.

Aside from martial nobility, there were nobles who took care of official matters within the imperial court or national offices. For simplicity’s sake, they could be likened to bureaucrats. These included nobles such as Cau Gaston, who was a high-ranking bureaucrat dealing with the kingdom’s financial affairs. These positions were not attained through examination; instead, it was the high-ranking officials who appointed people. In other words, receiving a position depended on who you knew and not what you knew, which of course made these positions a breeding ground for corruption.

“What do you mean there are several documents missing?!” Cau Gaston bellowed.

Despite his advanced age and rotundity, he gave off the impression of a middle-aged man. His golden hair was the same hue as the millions of coins in his possession, and the curve of his handlebar mustache was nothing short of perfect. His eyes pointed sharply upwards at the corners, giving off a daunting air of might and cunning.

In front of him stood one of his servants, who managed his estate. Lunch had just ended, and he was here for his first report of the afternoon.

“How the hell could you let this happen?” Gaston’s voice reverberated through the room as he put his pen down forcefully on the desk.

“I’m sorry, My Lord!”

“Sorry won’t cut it!”

The servant bowed as deeply as he could in apology. He allowed himself to be battered by the marquess’s explosive outburst for a good while, waiting until he was satisfied to speak up again.

“If I may, My Lord, I have reason to believe there is more to this than meets the eye.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“The place these documents were stored is in quite a mess, suggesting that somebody was searching for them.”

“Are you telling me that the documents were taken from the estate?”

“Most likely, My Lord.”

“Which documents are missing specifically?”

“My Lord...”

The documents the servant named included financial records and documents which hinted at corruption. After his explanation, Gaston stubbed his cigar calmly into the ashtray on his desk.

“If that is all, then everything should be fine.”

Despite learning about his stolen documents, Gaston didn't even break a sweat. It was clear that he thought those documents alone wouldn't be enough to prove anything. In other words, while they were valid as evidence, he was confident that he had the power to quickly stamp out anything that came of the theft.

There was, however, one thing he could not ignore.

"A ledger has also gone missing," the servant informed him.

"Hmph. That's not good."

Gaston's expression darkened. That ledger proved that he didn't pass on as much of his territory's taxes to the state as he was supposed to.

But Gaston was still calm. Even this new discovery wasn't enough to destroy him. He would just pretend it was all a mistake, make a couple of bribes, and hand over the correct amount. At the same time, it would still be best that ledger wasn't discovered. Even if he could brush it under the rug, the state would be keeping a close eye on him afterward.

"Do you have any idea when these things went missing?"

"It was likely at the recent party."

"Hmm..."

Due to the nature of the guests at the party, security had been tight. However, the sheer number of them (it was a particularly large party, even by Gaston's standards) meant there was still a fair chance of slipping by unnoticed. It was just a matter of striking at the right time.

"Do you think it might have been someone from the Surveillance Office?"

"It is very likely, My Lord. There have been recent reports of a suspicious individual within the estate."

"Ah, so it might even be a spy. What a nuisance..."

The Surveillance Office was made up of the royal family's lapdogs. Their job was to observe the kingdom's various nobles and make sure that they were following the King's laws. They sniffed out corruption, whether from inside or out.

Of course, Gaston hated them from the bottom of his heart. Though he cursed them now, his demeanor remained calm. His dealings had been dirty from the moment he took over the estate, and this wasn't the first time he'd come under suspicion.

"Do you know where this questionable individual is at the moment?"

"We already have him detained, My Lord."

"Detained? That doesn't make sense." Gaston frowned.

If they detained the perpetrator, then why were the documents still missing? Surely they could have retrieved them in that case?

"It seems he no longer has the documents in his possession."

"Does that mean the Surveillance Office already has its hands on them?"

"It would appear not."

"Hmm... Are you sure you detained the correct individual?"

"We hope to find out soon, as he is currently under investigation."

There was a pause while Gaston mulled everything over. "If they went missing at the party, then I would have expected a summons to the castle by now."

A good number of days had already passed. Even if the office dallied about accusing him, he should have heard something by now if they really were handed those documents. Therefore, the possibility that the thief hid them somewhere couldn't be disregarded.

"How far along are you?" Gaston asked.

"We have been going at it for a while, but we are having trouble getting him to talk."

"If you need to use violence, do so. Anything it takes to get him to sing."

"Begging your pardon, My Lord, but I did hear something interesting in regards to the documents' current location."

"Go on."

"One of the attendants on duty that evening mentioned seeing Lord

Raytheft's daughter leaving with a bag she didn't have on arrival."

"Raytheft's daughter? She was likely just taking home one of the gifts I prepared for the guests."

"Apparently it looked completely different, My Lord."

"Different how?"

"A black bag, My Lord, which did not match the color of her dress."

"Hmm..."

Gaston wasn't entirely convinced. He met the Raytheft girl for the first time at the party, and she only looked to be about ten years old. He couldn't imagine the Surveillance Office was taking on child labor.

"Suppose those documents were inside it. How did they get there?"

"One of the state's officers might have passed them on to her, taking advantage of her innocence, My Lord."

"Yes... that does seem to be the only reasonable explanation." Gaston let out a frustrated sigh.

"My Lord, if I may, I can arrange for the Raythefts to be contacted and the bag retrieved. Without making the reason why known, of course."

"No, that won't work. I'm sure that would push Joshua to check the contents. Don't forget, the Raythefts are one of the eastern military houses. If he finds out what is inside, it will be reported right away."

The eastern military houses were united under Count Cremelia. They were uniformly proud and stubborn when it came to denouncing injustice. Contacting the Raythefts at this point would be one of the most dangerous things Gaston could do. He let out a deliberately loud sigh.

"What to do, what to do... I certainly don't want this coming out to the houses in the east if I can help it." He paused for thought. "Have the girl sent here—in secret, of course. We'll try to persuade her to return it."

"Persuade her, My Lord?"

"Yes. Be absolutely sure to treat her gently for now."

Indicating that the conversation was over, Gaston returned to his work.

He completely missed the grin that appeared on the servant's face.

Charlotte Cremelia: Daughter to one of Lainur's military families.

She was twelve years old, with long, soft, golden-brown hair. The longer hair around her face fell to beneath her cheeks, and her amber eyes shone like gems.

She came from a highly prestigious house with a long history of developing and keeping the kingdom's style of fencing. Her father, General Purce Cremelia, was a great aristocrat who oversaw the eastern border territory and commanded the national armed forces. Along with this large territory, they held a great estate within the royal capital.

None of the many nobles Charlotte met above or below her house had any complaints to make about her. Thanks to her noble birth, many considered her a beautiful butterfly, a flower, or even a princess: something to be protected and treasured. Her father, however, insisted that she learn how to wield the rapier, and so she spent a good part of her time practicing.

This day, she was very much engrossed in her training.

She was training in one of the Cremelias' many training halls in the kingdom's capital. This one was considered both the biggest and the best hall and saw use by a good number of noble children. Several windows clung to the high walls, letting plenty of sunlight splash against the spacious floor.

As the students sparred, their enthusiastic battle cries resounded in the hall.

Charlotte's opponent was an older man and one of her father's best pupils. His shoulders were broad and muscular, and she was overcome with the sensation that she was actually sparring with an imposing statue.

Usually her father or brother, Wayne, would practice with her, but they couldn't always find the time when their duties got in the way. It was at times like these that she would spar with one of her father's students, handpicked for their superior abilities.

Charlotte pointed her wooden sword at her opponent, her body turned to one side as she focused. In turn, he put his right foot forward, turned his hips so that his torso was facing the side, and held out his sword.

This was the most basic stance of the art.

She was facing a grown adult. It would be a very difficult victory for her to claim under normal circumstances, given their size difference, but Charlotte knew just how she was going to do it.

She steadied her breathing, waiting patiently for a chance to strike.

The very next moment, her opponent's attack appeared out of nowhere. Sensing it the second before launch, Charlotte dodged, leaving his sword hanging where she was just moments before. She seized her opportunity then, striking out at the back of his neck and forcing him to concede.

This was her second victory of the five matches they had today. Though she sensed her opponent's attacks each time, her body wasn't always fast enough to get out of the way or to match the swiftness of his movements. In these cases, just perceiving what he was going to do wasn't enough, leading to her defeat.

As the man commended her efforts, Charlotte heard somebody entering the hall. She didn't have to look to feel the powerful air coming from her father.

Immediately, the tension in the hall thickened. Greeting his pupils as he passed, Purce approached his daughter.

"Father."

"Hello, Charley. Working hard again, I see."

"Yes. I have managed two victories against Zell here."

Her father's eyes widened in surprise. "You can already hold your own against him?"

"Yes, Father." Charlotte bowed her head elegantly.

It was then that Zell piped up to sing Charlotte's praises for Purce, calling her a natural, highly skilled, and so on. Charlotte found herself staring at the floor in embarrassment at his ceaseless string of compliments.

“It looks like you really are gifted with the rapier,” Purce commented.

“Gifted?”

“Yes. More so than Wayne or me.”

When Purce used the word “gifted,” he didn’t mean that you were vaguely good at something. He meant that you had undeniable talent: the kind that was granted by the heavens at your moment of birth. You were someone whose skills were far beyond that which the average person could even hope to achieve.

This kingdom’s royalty and its heroes who earned their fame on the battlefield—he considered those people amazingly gifted too, else they would not be in their positions. “Gifted” was also how he described Charlotte, Wayne, and himself.

Was this “gift” he spoke of the power to foresee her opponent’s moves? Charlotte wasn’t entirely sure.

“I feel their moves,” Purce told her, “in my gut. What about you?”

“I can see them,” Charlotte replied.

“Astounding,” her father breathed. “I honestly think you have it in you to become the kingdom’s top fencer.”

For some reason, she sensed that he wasn’t entirely happy about that, but his expression quickly reverted to something less complex.

“Charley. Remember this.”

“What is it, Father?”

“Even if you can see your opponent’s moves, that does not make them a certainty. Even if you can see your own defeat, that is not a reason to give in. Things can still change.”

“As long as I don’t give in, I can still win?”

“That’s right. Incidentally, Charley, what are your plans for this afternoon?”

“Lecia and I are to go for a walk around the city.”

“Ah, yes, young Lecia, the daughter of my ally. Make sure you look after her.”

“Yes, Father,” Charlotte assured him with a determined nod.

Usually, it was the lower-ranking nobles who protected those above them, but her father was emphasizing the responsibilities that the higher ranks had for those below them. He believed that those beneath you were not to be used as a shield but instead were under your guardianship. While each of them worked to protect *you*, you were the one who kept them safe by gathering them under your wing. The most important thing was not to take them for granted.

Lecia was not only the viscount’s daughter, but a younger friend of Charlotte’s. It was therefore her responsibility to keep the younger girl safe.

“I swear on my sword,” Charlotte proclaimed.

“Good.” Purce gave a satisfied nod.

“Father, would you train with me until it is time to leave?”

“Very well. Take up your sword.”

The two of them sparred for some time before Charlotte wiped away the sweat, caught her breath, and returned to the estate.

There, she was informed that Lecia was waiting for her in the reception room. She went to see her friend immediately, who greeted her by rising from the couch and curtsying.

Lecia was dressed as adorably as ever. Her shiny, silver hair was in its usual ponytail, and she wore her usual frilly blouse and blue ribbon, complete with a blue skirt. Along with her pink lips and round cheeks, every last inch of her was utterly charming.

Most of all, Charlotte admired her ruby-red eyes. They weren’t just beautiful; they had an honest and innocent shine to them.

Once the two of them greeted each other, they set off into the city. Thanks to the abundant guards on patrol, the main street, commercial areas, and roads lined with noble estates were perfectly safe for children to wander alone, though the same couldn’t be said for the downtown bazaar or alleyways.

As Charlotte and Lecia walked together, they caught up with what was going

on in each other's lives. They spoke of how their studies and training were going, shared gossip of other noble families, and discussed what sort of accessories were in fashion lately. After a while, the topic changed to the documents from the party.

"You gave them to Arcus for safekeeping?"

"That's right."

Charlotte was already well acquainted with Lecia's brother and his less-than-stellar reputation. She understood, at least in an academic sense, why he was cut loose—the Raytheft heir would, by definition, need the aether reserves to sustain their front in the war effort. How could the commander hope to lead if he couldn't keep up with his troops and had no more aether than the average magician?

She still felt bad for Arcus, given that he'd lost so much purely through an irreparable accident of birth. Since magical prowess was all the Raythefts cared about, it allowed them to cut him off mere years after he was born. That was also presumably why Joshua had so decisively called off her engagement with his son.

Lecia, however, spoke of her brother in a very different way.

"The bag shall be safe if it's with him," Lecia said.

"You have an awful lot of trust in him, don't you?"

"I do." Lecia broke into a smile, which wasn't a rare sight at all when she was talking about Arcus. Charlotte guessed that he probably doted on and treated her very gently indeed.

During her life so far, Charlotte had met all sorts of young noblemen of her age. Some trained endlessly to take command of their martial houses, and some devoted their time to study so that they could inherit their lot from their fathers. Some worked hard in learning how to conduct themselves and display perfectly elegant behavior, and some, usually from particularly wealthy houses, even felt able to shirk their studies or physical disciplines.

Charlotte tried very hard to picture what Arcus might look like, using Lecia's appearance as a template. In her mind, she saw a well-mannered young boy

with Lecia's silver hair and a thin frame. He looked withdrawn and completely unsuited for any sort of conflict. Charlotte then imagined him standing by her side as her husband. It was... a strange sight, to put it politely.

"Charlotte?"

"Yes, Lecia?"

Lecia's small voice interrupted her trail of thought. She looked down to see her friend staring anxiously at the ground.

"Do you think... the sort of talent one can see is really that important?"

"I must say I'm not quite sure myself." Charlotte paused, considering the question from a noble point of view. "However, as nobles, we are placed in a position above others. Power justifies that position. Without more power and talent than the average person, a noble risks illegitimacy, I daresay. And when one holds such great talent, it is invariably visible to everyone."

"Oh..."

Her answer probably did nothing to soothe Lecia's worries about her brother. Charlotte thought for a while, trying to put herself in Arcus's shoes. What if she turned out to be completely useless at fencing and was shunned because of it? Charlotte was sure that her own father would never treat her that way, despite her lack of ability, but she could certainly see it happening if she were born into a different noble family. When she framed it like that, she could see the injustice in it. Her future stripped away from her at such a young age, and there was absolutely nothing she could do about it...

Having walked for a while, Charlotte and Lecia left the noble estates behind them. They were now approaching the main shopping district, discussing which stores they should visit first. All of a sudden, they heard hurried footsteps pounding against the cobblestone road. The next moment, they were surrounded by a number of men. From the looks of things, their formation was planned in advance.

"Charlotte? What's going on?" Lecia asked anxiously, as Charlotte found herself speechless.

Every escape route, both in front and behind, was blocked off by precisely ten men in total. Apart from the two girls and these men, there was no one around to help, either. Charlotte readied her hand on her rapier before calling out to them.

“Identify yourselves!”

“We don’t need to!” One of the men stepped forward.

He appeared to be the leader of the group. He was broadly built, with just a little excess fat on his stomach. Untamed stubble sprouted on his round chin, and he was slimy, even compared to the people who usually hung around this part of the city. Charlotte also noticed that he was wearing completely different armor from what was typical of the capital’s guards.

His chest armor was leather, his gauntlets iron, and there was a large broadsword on his back. Some was new, and some old, as though he cobbled the whole set together from whatever he could find. Charlotte doubted very much that he was related to a noble or merchant family.

The men with him were dressed similarly, a clear sign that they belonged to the same group.

Charlotte stepped forward, covering for Lecia behind her.



“What do you want with us?” she demanded.

“We just want you to come along. Won’t take long.”

“Do you really think we shall be accompanying you willingly?”

As the leader swaggered toward her, Charlotte drew her rapier and held its tip to his face. The man grinned at her mockingly, as though she had done no more than hold a bunch of flowers out to him.

“Fierce little one, aren’t you? I can see why people admire you, Miss Charlotte. But what does a frail princess like you think she can do against a whole group of men like us?” he guffawed.

Charlotte felt disgust coiling in her stomach as the other men joined in. The man then turned his gaze to Lecia.

“Don’t you worry, Miss Raytheft, we’ve got a magician here with us, too.” The large man jerked his chin in the direction of one of the others.

He already picked up on the fact that Lecia was preparing to use magic.

Just as the man said, there were several men who were dressed like magicians among their group. Though the girls had no way to tell whether they really could use magic, the leader didn’t seem to be lying.

Charlotte pushed the thought from her mind; there were more important things at hand.

“You know who we are?” Charlotte questioned.

“Yeah.”

“How?”

These men knew both Charlotte’s and Lecia’s identities. That alone told Charlotte that they weren’t your ordinary back-alley kidnappers. They knew they were dealing with nobility, and yet they still targeted them.

“I’d appreciate it if you could put your sword away, Madame. As long as you do what we say, we won’t harm you, all right?”

“What reason have I to trust in your words?”

“So it’s a fight you’re wanting, is it?” Bending backward ever so slightly, the large man unsheathed the broadsword from his back.

Charlotte’s eyes narrowed. A sword fight was just what she was hoping for.

“Ch-Charlotte!” Lecia called out anxiously.

“Leave it to me, Lecia. As soon as I’ve dealt with this, we can make our escape.”

“But Charlotte—”

“Trust me. He is not as much of a threat as he seems to believe,” Charlotte replied confidently.

She wasn’t bluffing, either. She was almost certain she would be able to claim victory. In fact, it was more than that: she couldn’t see herself losing.

She spent countless hours in the training halls, taking on and defeating adult opponents just like this one. The evidence was clear. This was a fight she was bound to win.

After all, she was gifted. Gifted with the ability to see her opponent’s moves before they even made them.

Even then, Lecia seemed nervous.

“What? You got some kinda plan or something?” the man asked.

“Yes. A plan which involves your defeat.”

“Ooh, I’m shaking in my boots!” The man grinned scornfully.

It was clear to Charlotte that he thought she was just putting on a brave face. While it was true their difference in size was not insignificant, she had fought several opponents even taller than him before.

She could do this. She could fight, and she could win.

If she defeated the leader here, she might be able to break through the men’s defenses and run away with Lecia.

The fighters held their swords out to one another. Charlotte focused, trying to foresee her opponent’s moves.

“Oh...”

Unwittingly, she let out a soft gasp.

She saw the man’s sword striking her and sending her body flying.

“What? *Now* you’re scared? Or did you just realize you have no hope of winning this match?”

Charlotte grit her teeth without responding and lowered her rapier.

She saw it: her own defeat. How could she fight now?

“Put your sword away,” the man repeated.

Charlotte paused before eventually doing as she was told and resheathing her rapier.

She had no hopes of winning a head-on fight with this man. Maybe if they were both armed with rapiers and it was just training, things would be different, but it was his broadsword which gave him an advantage.

In her vision, the man had barely even reacted to the thrust of her sword. She was only a young girl, and to him her thrust was no more powerful than a wasp sting. She was foolish to think she could beat him. Beating so many adults in the training hall had given her a false sense of confidence.

At that moment, one of the men, his hood pulled low over his eyes, stepped forward. Charlotte watched him cautiously. He was dressed completely differently to the others. As he approached, the larger man opened his mouth.

“This is them, right?”

The hooded man nodded. He wasn’t talking; he likely wanted to keep his identity a secret. After a while, the larger man spoke again, this time addressing Lecia and Charlotte.

“Come with us.”

“Do you even understand the gravity of your actions? Kidnapping children of noble heritage is a serious crime!” Charlotte protested.

“You can tell it to the guy who hired us.”

The guy who hired them? Did he mean the man in the hood?

“Is that you?” Charlotte asked him.

No response.

“Answer me!” She raised her voice.

The next moment, the larger man had his broadsword at her throat. She didn’t even have time to react. Even if she had, the difference in strength would render her actions useless.

“Please keep calm, Madame. You too, Miss Raytheft.”

Charlotte swallowed.

“P-Please do not harm Charlotte!” Lecia called out.

“I won’t, as long as you behave. Just do what we say and don’t resist.”

Lecia was forced to shrink back, despite her courageous outburst. The two of them no longer had any choice but to follow after the men. They were led far away from the noble residences to an area which was totally deserted. There stood a carriage waiting for them.

Drawn by two horses, the carriage was much more splendid than it had any right to be in a desolate area like this. The windows were adorned with heavy curtains that blocked anything that was going on inside from view.

Lecia and Charlotte were ushered into the carriage by the ringleader and the hooded man, who got on after them.

“Charlotte...” Lecia whimpered.

“We shall find our chance to escape,” Charlotte promised her.

Lecia nodded.

“And if not...”

“I know...” Lecia whispered, her voice trembling, “I know what I should do if it comes to the worst.”

She meant that she would kill herself.

They were in danger of being sold off or used as their kidnappers pleased. That was usually what happened to kidnapped children. To be treated like that,

as a child of nobility, was nothing but disgraceful. Death would be a preferable fate in order to protect the honor of your house.

Charlotte was determined not to let it come to that. Especially not for Lecia. If not herself, she wanted her friend to escape, at least.

The carriage moved on, and eventually they arrived at Count Gaston's estate.

Charlotte recognized it at once, the extravagant building still etched into her memory from the night of the party. Alighting from the carriage, they passed the gate and followed the path to the mansion, moving past lines of bronze statues by famous sculptors and toward the tiled terrace—still furnished for abundant company—where the scent of roses surrounded them.

“Does this mean that the man who hired you is—”

“Quiet. Just follow us.”

The pair were led to the guest room, where they were invited to sit down on the sofa. A servant appeared shortly to serve them tea. There were tea cakes piled high on the table in front of them, as though they were completely ordinary guests.

Charlotte was slowly starting to realize just what was going on. Judging by the nervous look on Lecia's face, she knew too.

After a brief wait, a single man entered the room. With his silk jacket and golden hair, he exuded an air of great importance.

“Marquess Gaston...”

“I must apologize for bringing you two ladies here in the way that I did,” he began.

Despite his words, he didn't look sorry in the least. He was completely composed, and it was clear his apology was wholly a formality.

“How do you do, My Lord,” Charlotte said. “If I might be so bold, to what do we owe this pleasure?”

“Firstly, I have some gifts I would like to share with you, by way of apology.”

“I intend to report this to my father,” Charlotte told him.

“Of course. Do as you wish.”

She tried to make her tone as icy as possible, but the marquess simply brushed off her words with a warm smile.

“Your Lordship seems utterly unconcerned,” she remarked.

“Of course. Something like this is unlikely to affect the good relationship I have with your father.”

“I suppose not...”

“This is how you play politics. I suggest you start taking notes.” Cutting himself a cigar, Gaston took three deep drags.

It was clear that he expected no consequences from his actions whatsoever. If he was bluffing, it was an elaborate, long shot bluff. Nobody witnessed the kidnapping itself, and now he was treating Lecia and Charlotte as guests. For him, it would be a simple matter of claiming that he was saving the girls from danger, and that they were just mistaken as to what the source of that danger was. Sending them home with gifts would be even more evidence to corroborate his version of events. Charlotte’s father might even *thank* him for it.

Even if the existence of the kidnappers was discovered, Gaston could claim that they were moving of their own accord. There was probably no evidence of their connection to Gaston anymore, if it even existed in the first place. The marquess was certainly powerful enough to make that happen.

“I suspect you two already have an inkling of why I’ve brought you here.” Gaston looked from Lecia to Charlotte and back again.

Lecia was perfectly composed as she responded. “Why?”

“You cannot outwit me, Miss Lecia. I already know you have them by the way you are conducting yourself now. And by ‘them,’ I presume you know what I mean.”

“The documents?”

“Well, yes. If documents were all you had, I wouldn’t need to do this. However, it is the ledger which I really need returned to me.” Gaston paused.

“If you wouldn’t mind.”

“I do not have it with me,” said Lecia.

“Then allow me to ask you something. Have you given it to somebody else? A surveillance officer, for instance?”

Lecia didn’t respond. Instead, she returned Gaston’s stare evenly. If she came clean, she would be betraying her code of honor. Once it was clear she wasn’t going to answer, the marquess let out an exasperated sigh.

“I do not want this to be more of an issue than it needs to be. As long as you return the documents and the ledger, all shall be well.”

In other words, if she didn’t, things might end up much less than “well” for her. But still Lecia remained silent. She wasn’t about to give in without a fight. The moment she discovered the contents of that bag, her pride as a noble took over. She was raised with a strong sense of integrity, and her silence screamed that she was not going to allow it to break. It was that integrity that allowed her to keep strong under Gaston’s pressure.

“It seems you’re unwilling to deal with me. But no matter. I planned ahead for this sort of response. Come!”

That final shout was not for Lecia, but for the kidnapper who had been waiting behind the girls. At Gaston’s command, he reached forward and grabbed Charlotte’s arm, who couldn’t help but let out a shriek.

“Charlotte!”

“Careful.” The man held a dagger to her throat.

So Gaston was planning to use her as a hostage. He looked at Lecia once more.

“I shall ask you again. Where are the documents and the ledger? I’d answer if I were you, if you do not wish harm upon Lady Charlotte.”

“You do not have to tell him, Lecia. He is only bluffing! There is no way that he shall—”

“This is no bluff. That man is completely under my command.”

Charlotte felt the cool metal of the dagger against her throat now, where it had been hovering a few inches away before. It was sharper than she reckoned with; if she so much as twitched, the blade would pierce her skin.

“You shan’t get away if you lay even a finger on me!” Charlotte warned.

“I can do what I like. It isn’t as though there are any witnesses here, after all.”

Lecia turned her anxious gaze toward Charlotte. If Gaston was serious, she was sure he was willing to go so far as to kill her. For Lecia now, it was her values or the life of her friend. Lecia trembled as she struggled to disentangle her rage from her sense of justice and her anxiety from her confusion. After what seemed like an age, she looked down resignedly.

“I gave the bag with the evidence in it... to my brother,” she finally admitted.

“I see.”

The marquess wasted no time in giving his next orders—orders which were clearly targeting Arcus. The kidnapper let go of Charlotte.

“You two ladies will stay here until the bag is retrieved. Please excuse me, Miss Lecia, but I’m going to have you gagged. I’m just taking precautions, you understand.”

With that, Gaston stepped out of the room.

Arcus sat in his room meditating, a practice he took up quite a while ago. As he sat quietly with his eyes closed and his mind empty of thought, he was interrupted by a servant at the door.

For any servant apart from Noah to come and see him was rare nowadays. In Noah’s absence, any matters that concerned Arcus were passed to him on his return, which meant that this matter in particular likely could not wait.

The servant came bearing a single envelope. Arcus asked him about it, but he claimed ignorance.

“I was just told to give this to you as soon as I could,” he explained.

“Who delivered it?” Arcus pressed.

“All I can say is that they were dressed rather well.”

The servant hadn't asked who the letter was from, and it didn't have any kind of indication of its sender either. Surely the servant understood that it was careless not to ask, but on the other hand, he likely knew that nobody was going to punish him if he didn't. Arcus asked once more just to be sure, but he received the exact same answer.

In any case, it was clear this was some kind of letter. But Craib was the only one who sent Arcus letters like this...

“Where's Lecia?” Arcus asked.

“Miss Lecia is currently out.”

“Okay. Thanks. You can go now.”

The servant gave a quick bow before leaving the room. Arcus studied the back of the envelope carefully, but there really was no hint of the sender to be found.

He wondered at first whether it might be the man who passed the evidence on to Lecia, but he dismissed the thought quickly. Such a letter would be sent to her, not him. Assuming this letter was unrelated to that, though, it was strange that the deliverer made no attempt to identify themselves. Anxiety began to gnaw at the pit of his stomach.

He arrived swiftly at the worst-case scenario.

Sitting at his desk, Arcus hurriedly slit the envelope with a letter opener. Inside was a single letter confirming his worst fears.

Bring the items given to you by your sister to the specified location. Do not tell your parents, or both girls will die.

“Goddammit!” Arcus slammed his fist down on the desk.

Lecia was the only one who knew he had the evidence, yet here was this letter, addressed specifically to him. A letter threatening death. There was no way this was from the man who originally passed on the bag to her, which meant there was only one person it could be: the person who the evidence threatened.

The marquess, Cau Gaston.

Arcus looked back at the letter.

“Both girls will die”... Who’s the other girl?

Was there someone else with Lecia who was caught up in all of this?

Just then, there was a knock at the door. “May I come in, Master Arcus?” called a voice from the other side.

“Sure. Go ahead, Noah.”

The door opened to reveal Noah Ingwayne himself, bringing a citrusy scent along with him.

As usual, he was dressed immaculately in his morning coat. His short, indigo hair was well brushed, and his golden monocle was perfectly placed on his handsome face. He gave a grateful bow before opening his mouth.

“I just ran into Jerry coming from your room. Did something happen?”

“He gave me this.”

“A letter?” Noah asked.

Arcus nodded, flinging it toward him. The servant scanned it quickly before looking up again.

“What is this all about?”

“When Lecia went to the marquess’s party, she came back with something she was told was evidence of his corruption.”

Arcus pulled out the black bag he had hidden away as he continued to explain to Noah. Once he was finished, Noah’s eyebrows knitted in concern.

“Do you mean to say you were hiding something this significant from me?”

“Yeah. I’m sorry. I never thought the marquess would find out.”

He thought it would be fine; the servant would come to collect the evidence, and that would be that. He hadn’t reckoned with Gaston looking into it before then.

“I shall keep my thoughts on that point to myself for now.”

“Thanks.”

“However, since Miss Lecia’s involvement has been discovered, we can assume that something already happened to the servant.”

“Yeah, I guess so. Dammit...” Arcus grit his teeth in frustration.

Thanks to that servant getting Lecia involved, she was now in danger. Whether the servant had ratted her out or Gaston had just made a lucky guess, Arcus was furious.

“In any case, we know that Miss Lecia has been taken. Shall I inform your parents?”

“Not yet, no.”

“But Master Arcus, I do not believe the marquess would actually go through with his threat.”

“Yeah, I don’t think so, either.”

It would be absolutely unthinkable for the marquess to kill the viscount’s daughter. If that was really Gaston’s intent, he would have needed to make sure the Raythefts couldn’t fight back first. Either that or he would have to get rid of every last shred of evidence that he was involved in her death.

“I do believe that informing somebody of this would be the most prudent course of action,” Noah advised.

“Right. Could you tell Craib for me?”

Politically speaking, Craib was higher ranked than Joshua. He would be more useful should things get ugly, and if Lecia’s parents were informed, then the entire estate would go into an uproar, which could prompt Gaston to act.

The marquess had to be desperate if he’d already resorted to kidnapping. Arcus suspected that the ledger was the most vital piece of evidence in his possession right now.

“I’m going to meet them, Noah,” Arcus added, gesturing to the letter.

“I doubt they are calling you out in good faith.”

“I know. They’ll probably grab me the moment they’ve got their hands on the

evidence.”

“Yet you intend to meet them?” Noah pressed.

“Yeah, but I won’t take the evidence with me.”

Arcus had put some serious thought into his decision.

“What exactly are you planning, in that case?” Noah asked.

“I’ll let them take me, and then I’ll escape with Lecia and this other girl. They probably don’t realize that I’m a magician, too.”

His assumption was made on the basis that even in a magically advanced kingdom like Lainur, children usually didn’t study magic before the age of twelve at the very youngest. At ten years old, he was beneath consideration, although they might be a little wary, since he came from a martial family.

“How about the possibility that you won’t be able to reunite with them?”

“That’s what Plan B is for. You’ll be in charge of that, Noah. While I’m doing all that and buying time, I want you to find out where at the marquess’s estate Lecia is being kept. You can do that, right?”

“Suppose I answered ‘no.’ You would ask me to do it anyway, wouldn’t you?”

“Bingo.”

“What is... Never mind.” Noah sighed. “You can be quite troublesome sometimes, you know.”

“I know. Anyway, when you’ve found Lecia—”

“I shall ask Craib to ‘do his thing.’”

“Yup. It’s not like he can storm in there without knowing where she is, right?”

If they had no proof Lecia was in there at all, and someone as high ranking as Craib broke in, there would be trouble—to put it *very* gently. They needed two things. The first was information, and the second was time to gather that information.

There was only so much Arcus could do to obtain those things. Whatever happened, relying on someone with Craib’s status was going to be his best bet.

It won't end there, though...

That stark realization suddenly came to him. No matter what, Lecia's safety was his top priority. But just saving her wouldn't be enough to end things once and for all. He had to come up with a way to settle everything *before* he acted. Should he rescue Lecia and leave it at that? Or should he expose the marquess for the corrupt official he was? Deep down, Arcus knew that even that wouldn't be enough.

"Master Arcus?"

It was important to figure out the root of the problem. The ledger aside, it shouldn't be a problem for a powerful man like Gaston to destroy the other evidence which pointed toward his misdealings. The official who gathered the evidence and passed it on to Lecia was likely someone from the Surveillance Office. But in that case, he should have been aware of how easily Gaston could destroy them, so why did he gather these documents in the first place?

Making them public called for careful planning if it was to have any meaningful effect on such a prominent social figure. The evidence needed to be absolutely watertight for any accusation to have a chance of sticking. Arcus was adamant that these documents were not enough for that, even combined with the ledger.

The other issue was why the official acted when he did, despite the lack of evidence. If he held out for longer, he might have gotten his hands on something more concrete, but by stealing the documents when he did, he threw that opportunity away. Perhaps he was just incompetent?

Not only that, but he identified Lecia as Joshua Raytheft's daughter and handed the bag over to her, knowing who she was. Arcus had no idea where to start with this question, and all these unknowns and suspicious individuals were giving him the creeps. It was like they were crawling around every corner, watching and waiting.

Maybe it was just his imagination, or maybe there was something more going on that his instincts were trying to warn him about. All he knew was that he didn't know.

“Noah. There’s something else I want you to look into, if that’s all right.”

“My, you do know how to keep a man busy, don’t you?”

“Not as much as Craib, I’m guessing.”

“No, perhaps not. Yet.” Noah sighed. This wasn’t the first time he’d voiced such a complaint.

Despite his grumblings, however, he never failed to do what Arcus asked of him.

With every part of his plan to rescue Lecia firmly in place, Arcus headed out to the location specified in the letter: a plaza within the capital.

Being quite a way away from the center of the city, this plaza in particular saw almost no traffic and was bound to be deserted. Clouds lay thick in the air today, blocking the sun enough that even the vampires in the tales from the man’s world might have ventured out during the afternoon.

An unfamiliar smell suddenly hit Arcus’s nose as he approached. It was somewhere between mold and sewage; either way, it wasn’t pleasant. This was doubtlessly one of the other reasons people avoided this place.

Still, Arcus stood there in the spotless outfit that Noah lent him. Mainly blue and white in color, he had both a shirt and a jacket. With his cute, round face, if only he wore a skirt and ribbon, you might even mistake him for his sister.

There was a shortsword on his hip suitable for a child. In one hand he held a black bag filled with the decoy evidence he prepared. Apart from those two items, he had nothing else.

Arcus waited. After a short while, he heard something stir.

“So he came...”

Someone noticed him. The small noises he heard were the faint rustling of clothes and footsteps on the cobbled path. The next moment, men approached from every corner and alleyway leading onto the plaza. It wasn’t just one or two, either; there were a total of six. Before Arcus knew it, they had already surrounded him. A particularly large man, one who Arcus could only assume

was their leader, stepped forward.

“Are you Arcus Raytheft?” he asked.

“Yes, I am,” Arcus replied evenly. Though he hated showing even the slightest bit of respect to these men—likely the same who kidnapped his sister—he knew he had to play his part for now.

He had to pretend to be the perfectly-mannered, helpless noble son that he wasn’t. That was of the utmost importance right now.

He studied the group of men carefully. None of them looked like a good sort. The leader didn’t look quite so bad, but his hair was ungroomed, and decent definitely wasn’t a word which came to mind. Their clothes were grimy; everything on them that was supposed to be white was instead a dingy off-yellow.

From their choice of arms, Arcus was convinced they weren’t run-of-the-mill alley-lurking bravos. Those scoundrels were usually armed with wooden clubs or blackjacks bungled together from rocks and cloth. The more dignified ones might have a dagger or knife on them.

The men in front of Arcus, however, were decked out with leather shoulder pads, shin guards, swords, and metal maces. They were dressed like the bouncers you’d find in a pub on the city’s outskirts. Though every man was equipped differently, they moved as one.

Are they mercenaries, perhaps? Arcus wondered.

It was common to see sellswords passing through the capital. These guys certainly weren’t ordinary soldiers, but at the same time, they looked like they knew this area well. Seeing how they were comfortable working in a group, Arcus was confident in his deduction.

It was likely that they were a group loyal to the marquess, who in turn was ready to cut them off at any time.

Just then, the leader turned around, as though indicating that they were moving on.

“Follow us.”

“W-Wait!”

“Huh?”

The man turned around. Meanwhile, Arcus had unsheathed his sword and was pointing it toward him.

“Where’s my sister! Give her back!” he demanded.

The man instantly burst into laughter.

“Fancy yourself a swordsman, little man? Still, you’ve got guts, but your posture’s all wrong!”

He was right: Arcus was slouching. With his neat clothes and poor posture, he must have looked like a coddled noble boy unused to fighting. And that was exactly what he wanted.

He wasn’t intending to fight these men here right now. All he wanted was to feign some resistance and give off the impression that he didn’t stand a chance against them, should it come to it.

Arcus approached the man completely unguarded, with his sword still pointing out toward him. He was careful not to use any of the stances he learned in his fencing training. Leaving himself totally defenseless, he was quickly sent sprawling, and his sword clattered across the cobblestones.

“Oof!”

“See? A kid like you can’t do anything against us!”

“N-No!” Arcus lamented, careful to show frustration on his face. “I-If only I could use magic!”

At the word “magic,” something in the leader’s head seemed to click.

“Oh, yeah. I heard the Raythefts’ son was useless.”

Arcus groaned. It had nothing to do with his act this time, though. Just how far had the rumors about him spread, that these oddballs knew about him? Although, given how much Joshua and Celine loved to talk about themselves, it probably wasn’t a difficult rumor to overhear.

Arcus rearranged his disgruntled features into a pleading look before

thrusting his hand out toward the man.

“F-Fire! U-Um... Go! Fire!”

“Ooh, call that magic?” the leader guffawed. “Think you could get me a rabbit from a hat next?”

His laughter was echoed by the men standing around him.

The next moment, Arcus was seized. He allowed himself a hidden sigh of relief that everything had gone to plan.

Humans were easy to understand if you broke it down. They tended to believe what they wanted to and favor information that confirmed their biases. Arcus showed them that he was a weak little boy with no hope of using magic, and they were now unlikely to change their view on that.

“Is this what he asked for?”

Arcus heard the men whispering behind him.

“They look like documents to me, yeah. I think that should be it.”

He looked over his shoulder to see one of the mercenaries opening up the black bag and checking the contents. It didn’t sound like he could read. The bag was full of page after page of complete drivel. Arcus made them in a hurry, worried that it would be suspicious if he took too long, but fortunately they were doing their job.

The mercenaries took Arcus to a nearby waiting carriage. After a short journey, they stopped in front of an extravagant estate, which must have belonged to the marquess. The entire building was covered in gold, and the perfectly landscaped garden was filled with large, carefully placed trees. Stone statues and golden fountains sat around the house’s perimeter.

The first word that came to mind was “gaudy.” Arcus cringed as he surveyed his surroundings out of the corner of his eye, and the men led him into the estate and to a certain room. It appeared to be a storage space—a far cry from any sort of guest room.

Lecia wasn’t there. It was annoying, to say the least, but Arcus planned for this.

“Did you get him?”

“Yes, Milord!” cried out the heavy-set leader.

The man who entered the room then was incredibly well-dressed. In fact, he was *too* well-dressed. He gave off an imposing air even next to the muscular mercenary; he was as ridiculously tall as Craib.

He must have been Cau Gaston himself. He was just as Noah described him.

He didn’t look like the sort of penny-pinching rat that you might expect, thinking of a white-collar crook. The way he walked, stood, and conducted himself had a certain dignity about it, and not one that could be dismissed easily.

He *did* look like a villain in his own way, but Arcus would be more inclined to refer to him as an “evil mastermind.” In any case, he was certain this man was not good news. The marquess approached him, and he almost found himself having to take a step back to accommodate his overwhelming presence.

Was this what the people at the very top were like? It seemed that these sorts of people (in this world at least) had so much dignity and overbearing personality that it was almost tangible, and only moreso the higher up the ranks you got.

“Are you Arcus Raytheft?” Gaston asked.

“That’s right. You must be Lord Cau Gaston.”

“Indeed I am! And I don’t suppose I have any need to hide it.”

“In that case, Your Lordship must be the one who sent that letter.”

Gaston simply nodded in response, as though he felt a full explanation would be too troublesome.

“Is my sister safe? Please, let her go!”

“Is that the ledger?” Gaston turned his gaze toward the black bag in the mercenary’s hand, who held it out to him immediately. Gaston examined the contents. “This isn’t what I asked for. I believe I asked you to bring the evidence your sister gave to you.”

Arcus didn't respond.

"Where is it? Answer me."

"The official already took it back."

Gaston didn't even flinch. Instead, a faint smile rose to his lips.

"Commendable effort, my boy. But if that were true, you would have no reason to even be here."

He was right. If the official had the evidence, there was no need for Arcus to risk showing up just to get himself captured.

"Tell me where it is. Otherwise, you'll only have yourself to blame for what happens to your sister."

As Arcus was expecting, the marquess moved on to threatening Lecia. Completely standard practice for someone who had taken a hostage. Arcus saw it all the time in period dramas from the man's world.

"I left the real evidence at home," Arcus said.

"Is there anyone else who knows it's there?"

"No. I hid it behind my closet," he lied.

"Oho."

Apparently having grown tired of the conversation the moment he had what he wanted, Gaston turned around. He began to mutter to himself, and it sounded like he was trying to work out how to retrieve the evidence. Arcus decided now was a good time to pour on more of his feeble-noble-boy act.

"Please, let my sister go! Then I promise I'll give you the evidence!"

"No. I cannot hand her over without being sure what you have is real."

"P-Please..."

"This is your own fault. If you had brought the evidence with you, I would gladly have returned Miss Lecia to you. You've already worked to fool me once! I am not going to let it happen again!"

Gaston doubled down. Words alone wouldn't be enough to get Lecia back. By

blaming Arcus for everything, he was probably hoping to weaken his resolve. Playing along, Arcus made a show of hanging his head.

“Milord, what should I do with the boy?” the mercenary asked.

“Take him away. I have no use for him now.”

“Should I take him to where the girls are?”

Arcus’s breath caught in his throat. Meeting up with them was the biggest part of Plan A. At the very least, it would allow him to ensure Lecia’s safety. After that, he could simply wait for his chance to break his cover and escape.

He already had a portfolio of spells in mind. In his dream, he learned about the refraction of light, which gave him the knowledge needed to create an invisibility spell. He also had a spell that would send his opponent straight to sleep. Though neither of their effects lasted very long, there was no doubt they would come in handy.

If things got ugly, he could always use his *Black Ammo* to drive enemies off or his fire magic to set the place alight.

He had a bevy of tools he could use in their escape. Unfortunately for him, it didn’t look like things were about to go his way.

“Yes, take... No, wait.”

“What’s the matter, Milord?”

Gaston didn’t reply immediately, instead stroking his chin and narrowing his eyes thoughtfully. He then slowly turned around.

“Take him to the Holy Tower, just in case. I shall sort out the paperwork.”

“Huh?!”

“What?!” Arcus gasped at the same time.

Why wasn’t Gaston keeping him here in the estate? Fortunately for Arcus, the mercenary seemed just as confused as he was.

“But why, My Lord? I understand if Your Lordship wishes to keep him apart from the girls, but in that case, I can take him to another room in the estate. But to take him to the Tower...”

“He is a Raytheft,” Gaston said, “and they are a martial family. It never hurts to be safe.”

“Is Your Lordship worried he will try and escape? I’ve seen him holding a sword, and he’s useless! He can’t use magic, either. I thought he was famous among the upper classes for his lack of skill.”

“Indeed. However, I do not wish to take the chance that it was all an act.” Gaston’s gaze slid from the confused mercenary to meet Arcus’s eyes.

He bent over, peering at him carefully. Arcus stared back at him as his face got closer. There was something in those eyes that sent a shiver down his spine. It was like the marquess could read his every thought. Anxiety gripped and curled around the boy’s every limb.

This was it. The overbearing presence peculiar to the upper noble classes. Beads of sweat started forming on Arcus’s neck as Gaston made him realize just who he was dealing with here.

“I think Your Lordship might be overthinking things. It doesn’t look to me like he’s hiding any special sword or magic skills. Plus, he’s a kid. I could just gag him and be done with it.”

“Enough. Take him to the Tower. That’s an order.”

“All right, Milord. Come on then, you.” The mercenary began to pull Arcus along, who stumbled after him.

He couldn’t believe he was being sent to the Holy Tower. From what he heard, it was a prison for magicians who committed crimes in the capital. There were anti-magic measures in place, and escape was said to be impossible, thanks to its famous impenetrable guard.

“What then, Milord? If the evidence is at the Raythefts’ place, it’ll be hard to take back.”

Gaston would need a very good excuse indeed to search another noble’s estate. It wouldn’t be an easy matter to sneak in, either. Their estate held all sorts of documents pertaining to the kingdom’s military affairs, and as such, security was tight. This mercenary could have fought a hundred battles, and Arcus would still bet he couldn’t break in.

“Yes, it is certainly a troublesome matter,” Gaston said with a sigh. “I suppose I would like you to go and see how things are first. I’m sure they are losing their heads with both children missing. Then, assuming they are not working to do anything against *me*...”

“What then?”

“We shall leave them be. It would mean that none of them suspects me, after all. When things have quieted down a bit, we can send someone in undercover.”

“What about the girls, Milord?”

“It is best that we get rid of them, just as planned.”

“Hey!” Arcus couldn’t let that last remark slide.

Gaston looked at him over his shoulder.

“Are you insane? I know viscounts aren’t exactly top of the pecking order, but they’re still noble kids, you know!”

“Exactly. It is not unusual for children of such status to go missing.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes,” Gaston replied airily.

“Just because you make them ‘disappear’ doesn’t mean people won’t catch on to what you’ve done! The Raythefts are a powerful martial family! As soon as they look into this, they’ll find out what happened right away!”

“The Raythefts shall do diddly squat. Everything will go according to plan.”

“How are you so confident?”

“Listen to me, young man. This world is run entirely by money. Money can buy you loyalty and sweep almost any sin imaginable under the proverbial rug.”

“So that’s it? You think money can solve anything?” Arcus pressed.

“I do not think. I know. Society works based on who has less and who has more. And as long as you have money, you can buy as much affection and as many adoring fans as you want.”

He was insane, which was exactly why Arcus was so afraid right now. He had to do something. Anything.

“Come on now, don’t squirm,” said the mercenary.

The next thing Arcus knew, something hard collided with his head, and then everything around him went dark.

Some time had passed since Arcus was knocked out, but Lecia and Charlotte knew nothing of those events. They were still on the sofa in the guest room with their hands tied behind their back and their weapons taken by one of Gaston’s men. Nobody was there to guard them, and so they were completely alone.

How careless, thought Charlotte, most people would be much more careful, even with regular hostages.

Having tied them both and gagged Lecia, they probably thought it would be no problem leaving them unguarded. Although, with their weapons taken, there was no way for Charlotte to cut her own rope, let alone take the gag out of Lecia’s mouth.

“Lecia, are you all right?”

Lecia could only nod in response, although there was a slight glint of guilt in her eyes. Considering her serious personality, she likely blamed herself for all of this.

“This is not your fault, Lecia,” Charlotte said gently. “It is the marquess’s fault...”

Who should enter the room at that moment, but the man himself? Charlotte stiffened, wondering what he was after now. Gaston smiled slightly.

“I apologize for the wait. However, everything looks like it will settle soon.”

Meaning that he wasn’t finished with them just yet. Assuming he already met with Arcus, that could only mean one thing.

“Does Your Lordship mean to say that Arcus did not bring the evidence?” Charlotte asked.

“You are certainly sharp, My Lady. Just as you suspect, the boy did not supply what I asked of him.”

“In that case, where is he?”

“He was starting to misbehave, so I had him put to sleep. Afterward, he shall be sent to the Tower.”

“Th-The Tower?!”

Could he mean the *Holy* Tower? But why would he send someone like Arcus to a place full of criminals? He was only a child!

“But Your Lordship cannot possibly send a noble child to a place like that without good reason! The viscount will surely...” Charlotte trailed off.

“Oh? What would the viscount do? Personally, I believe he shan’t lift a finger. Everybody knows he has shunned his own son. In fact, he shall probably think I am doing him a service.”

“He...” Charlotte began, but she couldn’t think of anything else to say.

She looked at Lecia, who was staring at the floor. That alone told Charlotte that her friend agreed with what Gaston was saying. She already knew Joshua did not look kindly on his son in the least.

At that moment, the door to the guest room opened. There was the lead mercenary with his broadsword. Immediately on entering, he bowed deeply.

“Pardon the intrusion, Milord.”

“What is it?” Gaston asked.

“I’ve finished the arrangements to have the kid sent to the Tower.”

“Ah. Good.”

The mercenary then turned to the girls and walked until he was standing right in front of Lecia. He grinned down at her nastily.

“Your brother was real entertaining when I was capturing him. He tried to threaten me with his sword, even though it was clear he had no idea what he was doing. You should’ve heard him whimpering!”

The mercenary carried on, taunting Lecia by rattling off insults about her

brother. About how he tried to fight with a sword he didn't know how to use. How he gave in the moment it was clear he couldn't win. How it was the first time the mercenary had seen such a pathetic kid.

Lecia glared up at him, her cheeks pinkening with rage as he continued to talk poorly of the brother she respected so much. It only seemed to spur him on, causing his mocking smile to twist further.

Lecia had spoken before of how hardworking Arcus was and his impressive command of magic, but listening to this man speaking now, Charlotte was convinced it was all just her bias talking. While it was brave of him to come and meet the marquess alone with fake evidence in hand, he was caught in the end anyway, making the whole thing meaningless.

"And he can't even use magic, even though he's from a martial family! You should've heard him!" The mercenary put on a squeaky voice. "Fire! Go fire!"

His crude laugh bounced off the walls.

Charlotte was confused. According to Lecia, Arcus *was* able to use magic. In fact, she claimed he was even able to use *Flamlarune*, a spell inspired by those usually reserved for the battlefield.

Somebody in the equation was lying, and Charlotte had a hard time believing it was Lecia, who was always such an honest girl. So what was going on? She didn't have time to think any more deeply into the matter before Gaston brought his face close to Lecia's.

"Miss Lecia. Is your brother really as talentless as everybody says?" he asked sternly.

So he was suspicious, too. With the gag in her mouth, Lecia was unable to respond. She simply met his gaze evenly.

"Your Lordship really is wary of him."

"I am more concerned about the attitude he displayed," Gaston said.

"His attitude?"

"Let me ask you something. When you captured the boy, he was docile and as naive as any other noble child. Correct?"

“That’s right, Milord. It was like he’d barely set foot out of his own house before.”

“However, when you brought him to me, he wasn’t the least bit afraid.”

“Huh? Why would he be scared, Milord?”

“Back then, I was doing all I could to intimidate him, and yet he was able to keep up with the conversation without even batting an eyelid.”

Charlotte knew just how intimidating Cau Gaston could be. It wasn’t just his size, but the dignity that he built around himself as one of the most powerful figures in the entire kingdom. Even a fully-armed soldier might have trouble standing up to him. While he would be no match for the head of a martial family, a child was a different matter.

Gaston brought his hand to his chin in thought.

“Remember, too, how quickly his demeanor changed when I suggested sending him somewhere else.”

“Oh... that’s right!”

“He didn’t falter at all when I told him I was not going to return his sister, but everything changed when I said I was putting him somewhere else. It is almost as if I ruined some plan of his.”

“Is that why Your Lordship said he was being sent to the Tower?”

“That wasn’t the only reason. I simply did not want him to be able to meet with the girls, should that have been his aim.”

“I don’t know, Milord, that seems a bit too paranoid to me. He’s only a kid. Of course he’d be unpredictable. He probably just didn’t react at first because he knew there was nothing he could do. I honestly don’t think he’s hiding anything at all.”

“I should hope he isn’t,” said Gaston, staring out of the window. But his gaze showed that he didn’t agree with the mercenary.

The window looked out onto the royal castle at the capital’s center. What was going through the marquess’s head as he studied it? Luckily, the mercenary was there to ask the question on Charlotte’s behalf.

“Is something the matter, Milord?” he asked, frowning in confusion.

“A question. Have you ever met a terrifying child?”

“A terrifying child?”

“I have. The crown prince,” Gaston said.

“Oh, I’ve heard about him! They say he’s a genius.”

“They do indeed.”

The Prince of Lainur. Though he was around Charlotte’s age, they said he was the greatest genius that the kingdom had ever seen.

It was common for the royal family to make a spectacle of praising the newborn heir to the throne. They said he was a “genius,” blessed by divine spirits, and more powerful than any mythical beast. Usually, such hyperbolic language would be used to send a message of the royal family’s power to both those within and without the kingdom, but since the royals themselves were already incredibly strong, it was unlikely to be an exaggeration.

The marquess turned back to address the room.

“Neither Lady Charlotte nor Miss Lecia act as typical children their age do because of their noble upbringing. Any child can be made to behave like they do if educated from a young age. But the prince is different. He is an open-minded, determined young man, and it is not something that has been forced upon him. He is dignified far beyond his years, even though he is only around ten or so. Speaking with His Royal Highness is like speaking with one my own age.”

“He’s still human though, isn’t he?”

“It is easy to say that if you have never met him. Easy to say that, no matter how powerful the royal family, they are still flesh and blood like the rest of us. That the only reason people fear them is because of their status. But they are not like us. They are not human. They are leaders—a different race entirely.” A single bead of sweat rolled down the marquess’s cheek.

“What about the King then, Milord?” the mercenary asked.

“I would advise you not to speak of His Majesty nor his son so casually,” Gaston rebuked, his expression grim with fear.

Just how powerful was the prince, to be able to have the marquess shaking in his boots like this?

“I have spent days wondering just what His Royal Highness hides beneath that exterior of his. And yet, after all that thinking, I have found no answer but gaping darkness.”

“Pardon me, Milord, but where is all this coming from?”

“Because I sensed something very similar from young Arcus Raytheft. That isn’t to say he compares to His Royal Highness, but he was similar. When I spoke with him, it was almost as though I wasn’t speaking with a child at all.”

The words escaped on a sigh from his lips. But then the marquess changed course, instead peering down at Charlotte. His face was completely expressionless now, and it sent a chill down her spine.

“Since it has come to this, I shall have the two of you die for me, and I may do it rather soon. I do hope you understand.”

It was the final threat that Charlotte was expecting all this time.

Part 3: The Eve of Battle

The mercenary took Arcus to the northern outskirts of the capital, where the Holy Tower waited. Its alabaster, cylindrical bulk extended far into the sky, and while it was dotted with windows here and there, the surface was otherwise completely smooth. Its architecture seemed far too modern for the time.

Both its outlandish design and the other buildings around it really made it seem like it was floating in the air. Yet there was more to this place than just that. What amazed most people about it was that, just as the name suggested, the Tower extended so far into the heavens that its top could not be seen from the ground. Arcus was reminded of the man's world's high-rises and radio towers.

The Tower was an impossible feat of architecture for the people of Lainur. It was a relic, said to have been built during the time *The Magician's Elegy* was written, well before the kingdom's founding. In the interim, it was repaired and reconstructed into a prison. It was also widely accepted that any criminal thrown in here had no hope of escape. The guards were handpicked from the kingdom's brightest and placed on every floor.

You couldn't slip past the guards from the inside, and the walls on the outside were too smooth to climb down. Jumping was out of the question.

None of that stopped Arcus complaining.

"You can't put me in here! I haven't even been questioned!"

When he came to, he found himself being dragged to the prison by a group of guards. From what he could tell, the mercenaries handed him over soon after he lost consciousness. Usually it would be difficult to consign someone to the Tower on such short notice, but it seemed the marquess had "friends" among the guards. Arcus cried out as soon as he woke up and realized what was going on.

"We're just doing our job," replied one of the guards, with the tone of a man

who had said the same thing countless times before.

Arcus knew it was a standard response, and so he pressed on. “Don’t you guys think it’s kinda weird that I’ve been sent here, and I’m only a *kid*?”

“What we think or don’t think is irrelevant. We just imprison who we’re told to imprison.”

“That makes you just like puppets! Puppets!” Arcus cried.

There was no response.

“Hey! Are you guys deaf?!”

Again, no response.

“Come on! Say something! What the hell is up with this place?!” He yelled at the stubborn guards.

Still, they ignored him.

Since they were being relatively gentle with him, Arcus had hoped his position as a child would test their conscience; clearly he needed to change tack. If the marquess told them to jump, they would likely scramble to ask how high.

“This world is run entirely by money.”

Gaston’s words echoed in Arcus’s head. Here, too, the power of money and social position was clear to see. But he didn’t have time to worry about society’s many inequalities right now. He failed to protect Lecia. Gaston had already promised to “get rid” of her; he had no more time to lose in making his escape.

With this many guards, that might prove to be difficult. He was surrounded on all sides, with one man on each arm to boot, and every guard was clad in some of the sturdiest armor he’d ever seen. If only there was some space between them and him, he might have been able to break through using magic.

There was one thing that worked in his favor.

Even though I’m a Raytheft, they haven’t gagged me...

It was common for dangerous magicians to be gagged so that they couldn’t chant their spells, but for some reason Arcus’s mouth was left free. He wasn’t sure whether they were confident in their defenses or they underestimated his

abilities. Perhaps they simply didn't know who he was or where he came from.

Arcus took in as much of his surroundings as he could, determined to do whatever he could. The walls around them were sturdy, but they weren't made of the stone that builders favored these days. It brought two images to Arcus's mind: the first was of hospital wards, and the second was of the laboratories you saw in science-fiction films. In any case, the walls were of a single color, without a bump or chip to be seen.

Each room they passed was sectioned off with a large pane of transparent glass. Though it looked fragile at first glance, that was precisely what made Arcus think it was built in the time *The Magician's Elegy* was written. He was certain the glass was sturdier than anything in common use nowadays.

Arcus and his guard climbed higher and higher before finally reaching their destination floor. From the number of steps and landings, Arcus would guess they were between twenty and thirty floors up. Here, there were many more cells than he'd seen previously.

These cells looked to be adapted from rooms extant from the Tower's original construction, and their inhabitants sat behind standard metal bars.

Eventually, they arrived at a cell at the deepest part of the floor.

"This one's yours."

Arcus found himself being pushed forward. He examined it closely. Just like the other rooms he'd seen, the wall was white and impossibly smooth, and the room was set behind a series of metal bars. Inside was a bunk bed and a bucket whose purpose was clear.

Someone else was already there.

"I'm sharing?"

"What? You shouldn't be." One of the guards frowned suspiciously into the cell. Glimpsing inside, he let out a sigh. "For pity's sake. Why are you still in there, Guari?"

"Cause I ain't got nowhere to go, have I?" came the response.

"Well you can't stay here, either. Did you see the sign outside saying this was

an inn? Because I didn't."

"What? But the room service is fantastic! And it's so clean and all..." The prisoner chuckled to himself.

"Well, you're not getting fed anymore, even if you do stick around."

"Shockin'! Won't be tellin' my friends about this place, that's for sure! Anyway, whaddya lads want?"

"We've brought the new prisoner who's taking this cell."

"Ooh, about time we got some company up 'ere."

"Yes, and we need the cell. So get out, find yourself a job, and go live an honest life. You must be qualified for something." The guard rapped his truncheon on the floor with another exasperated sigh. He then turned his attention to Arcus. "Well, this is your cell. In you go."

As soon as the entrance was opened, he pushed Arcus inside.

The man inside spoke up the moment he lay eyes on him. "Huh? Why's 'e so puny for?"

The prisoner frowned at Arcus in confusion. Arcus was a little indignant at the emphasis on the word "puny." That thought quickly left his mind when he realized that he recognized his new cellmate.

"Hey! You're..."

"No way! It's you!"

It was the kidnapper that went after him and Sue all that time ago.



His gaunt face looked just as sinister as ever, not helped by his slanted, beady eyes. He was lanky, and his hair was ungroomed and uncut. It was longer than the last time Arcus saw him, but he was sure this was the same man.

The guard peered through the bars. "You two know each other?"

"Yeah, this kid's one of them who got me in here in the first place."

"Oh?" But it was clear the guard wasn't too interested, since he turned and left without another word.

The moment he was gone, Arcus took a step backward. He didn't want to be near this creep. He felt his entire body tensing up instinctively as he watched the man.

The kidnapper didn't move. He just lay on the bed with his arms folded behind his head, a towel on his face, and his legs crossed, as though Arcus's presence made no difference to him whatsoever. Arcus waited, but he didn't even twitch. Instead, after a while, he waved a dismissive hand through the air.

"I ain't gonna do nothin', okay? Ya don't need to worry."

"You sure? I did get you put in here, after all."

"Yeah! Thanks, by the way. Free room and board for a full two years! Lovely!"

"Y-You mean... you're not mad?" Arcus would expect the kidnapper to bear a grudge against him, but he wasn't feeling any anger from him at all.

"What? Ya think I'm gonna try and get my revenge?"

"You mean you're not?"

"Nah. I mean, it was kinda outta line what I did to ya, right? We'll call it a blunder, yeah? 'Sides, I don't really like bullyin' kids." The man removed the towel from his face as Arcus continued to stare at him suspiciously. "C'mon, quit glarin'. Still don't believe me?"

"I... I dunno."

"I guess I get it. I am a crim, after all. Though, you'll be stayin' with me whether ya like it or not. So let's try and be nice and friendly, yeah?"

"Didn't the guard say you had to get outta here?" Arcus asked.

“I ain’t got nowhere to go, just like I said to him. And ’least I get fed here.”

“Is food really such an issue for you?”

“Course. Food’s expensive, y’know.”

“I thought they made you work when you get a long sentence?”

“Yeah, but I’m only in here for two years, so they ain’t makin’ me. Though they woulda been harder on me if they knew just what kinda kids you guys were.”

“But your sentence is over! Why don’t you just leave?” Arcus asked incredulously.

“Cause no one’s gonna make me.”

“How come?”

“Probably ’cause it’s too much effort. They’ve got bigger fish to fry than me.”

So they were short-staffed. Arcus still couldn’t understand the kidnapper’s line of reasoning. At this rate, he’d never be out of here. Perhaps he felt this was the only place he could survive.

“I dunno though. I think you could get a job wherever you wanted,” Arcus said.

“What makes ya say that?”

“You’re a magician, aren’t you? A pretty good one, too.”

“Huh? Why’dya think so?”

“The girl who was with me, Sue... You blocked her attack so well. In fact, you were able to stand up against every one of her attacks. You couldn’t have done that without a decent amount of study and practice.”

“Nah, that girl was just weak.”

“You’re kidding... right?” Arcus frowned at him, but the man broke into an unexpected sneer.

“You’re a weird kid. Though I guess she was pretty good at magic for her age.”

“So why are you still here if you’re a decent magician?” Arcus pressed.

“Cause I ain’t good enough to make no money.”

“Money...” There was that word again.

“Yeah. Cash. You’re a kid, so ya probably don’t understand, but ya need cash to get anywhere in life. If ya got it, great; if you ain’t, you’re stuffed. Ya can even become a noble if you’re rich enough, y’know?”

While that was true, Arcus didn’t see why that meant he had to give up on everything. Now that he thought about it, the kidnapper went on about money an awful lot the first time they met, too. Perhaps there was something specific he needed it for.

“So, what did they chuck ya in here for then? Ya don’t look like ya could commit a crime or nothin’.”

“What makes you say that? What if I killed a man or two?” Arcus said.

“Quit it. Your face is too soft for that kinda stuff. Ya really should think about gettin’ that changed if ya can, ’cause the cutie-pie look don’t suit ya.”

“D-Don’t call me a cutie-pie!”

“Ooh, hit a nerve, did I?” The man screeched in laughter.

Arcus scowled and looked away, redirecting his thoughts to his current predicament.

“If this is really a prison for magicians, how come security is so lax?” he asked.

“Just ’cause you can use magic don’t mean you can get outta here so easy. The walls can take a real pounding, and the guards have some real good kit on ’em. Escape ain’t a walk in the park,” the kidnapper said. “By the way, the worst crims get their teeth and tongues pulled out, and the even worse ones than that get sent to go get tore up deep in the Stone Valley.”

“Whoa...”

It sounded cruel, but removing a magician’s tongue and teeth was the quickest way to rob them of their power. The Stone Valley was a terrible place, too. Working in its furthest depths with the rudimentary tools and methods available to the people of this world could strike you blind and scorch a body inside and out.

“Anyway, if someone’s caught tryin’ anythin’ funny, the guards’ll just rush ‘em. So I wouldn’t worry too much about none of it.”

Even though, relatively speaking, the pair were in one of the lower parts of the Tower, it was still high up. The hallways were narrow and winding, and because of the Tower’s structure, even the best magician couldn’t make it out by themselves.

“Listen, I really wanna get outta here,” Arcus said.

“Nah, ’snot possible. Did ya even hear what I said?” The kidnapper flopped back down onto the bed before turning away from Arcus and curling up into a ball. He definitely wasn’t planning on going anywhere.

Not that Arcus was expecting his help. They were practically strangers, after all. In any case, if Arcus wanted to make his escape, he’d have to get past the first hurdle: the iron bars in front of him. Not only were they solid, but they were engraved with seals designed to defend against magic.

“These are some pretty interesting seals,” Arcus murmured as he studied them.

“Yeah, and ya ain’t gonna be breakin’ them bars any time soon,” said the kidnapper wearily.

He was certainly stubborn about how impossible this all was. But then, Arcus was stubborn about making his escape. Having finished his inspection of the seal, Arcus straightened up.

“Ya ain’t gonna—”

“Razor Aquarius.”

“Huh?”

The metal bars clattered to the floor, causing the kidnapper to sit up straight on the bed in shock.

“What the hell did ya do?!”

“Uh, well, I’m a magician. So I used magic.”

“I’m not stupid... I know that much!”

“So now I can leave,” Arcus informed him.

“No, ya can’t! The guards’ll have ya!”

“I’ll just have to fight them off, then.”

“Listen, kid, why’re ya in such a hurry anyhow? Why don’t ya wait, and someone might come and save ya.”

If Arcus were any other noble child, his parents would likely cause a stink and get him out. It was a fair assumption to make, as long as he hadn’t committed any real crimes. Parents aside, Noah and Craib probably wouldn’t hesitate to bust him out if they knew. It was only a matter of time.

But time was the one thing Arcus didn’t have.

“My sister’s in danger.”

“Whaddya say?”

“If I don’t get outta here soon, I dunno what’ll happen to her. So I have to go rescue her.”

This was the marquess he was dealing with. With the way he acted and spoke before, Arcus was almost certain Lecia was facing a death sentence. Even with Plan B as a back up, he didn’t want to risk putting all his faith in it. He could worry about how dangerous his actions were afterward. Nothing mattered except saving Lecia’s life.

“What’s goin’ on with ya exactly?”

“My sister came into evidence of a certain high-ranking noble’s corruption, and now he’s holding her in his estate.”

“And ’cause ya tried to save her, ya messed up and got chunked in here?”

“Yeah.” Arcus nodded. He *had* messed up and landed himself in a much bigger predicament than he expected for it.

The kidnapper suddenly let out a cold, dry scoff. “Nobles though, am I right? It’s all about the money, all the time.”

Arcus shot him a puzzled look.

“But forget about tryin’ to face him head on, okay?”

“What, so I’m supposed to let my sister die?”

The kidnapper didn’t reply. Arcus still couldn’t figure him out, but he had bigger things to worry about. He peered into the hallway, scanning left and right. There was nobody in sight. He listened closely, but there was only silence.

Just then, he sensed somebody behind him.

He looked over his shoulder.

It was the kidnapper.

“I’ll give ya a hand, okay?”

“Huh?” Whatever Arcus had been expecting, it wasn’t that.

If the kidnapper noticed his confusion, he didn’t say anything. “I’ll want a reward though, of course. Cold, hard cash, if ya please.”

“U-Um, b-but...”

“What’sa matter?”

“I... I just don’t get why you suddenly wanna help me.”

“Quit gawkin’ at me. This ain’t a zoo. I just thought I could make a quick buck. So whaddya think? If ya pay me for it, I’ll help ya out.”

“All right,” Arcus replied. “If you help me, I’ll pay you the best I can.”

“I never forget who owes me, okay?”

“Got it.”

Arcus mind still hadn’t caught up with the current situation. Why had this man changed his mind all of a sudden? In any case, he wasn’t about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

“Thanks, um...” Arcus suddenly realized he never caught the man’s name.

“Name’s Cazzy. Cazzy Guari.”

“Right, Cazzy. I’m Arcus Raytheft.”

“Raytheft... Don’t tell me you’re from that famous soldierin’ lot? Blech.”

Apparently Cazzy wasn’t a fan. Arcus was starting to wonder whether he

could really trust this man...

Money. Money was everything.

I was sure that was the case, even now.

After all, without money, you couldn't live.

No matter where I was or how far I went, money troubles always hovered above my head like a dark cloud.

Without money, you couldn't live.

I never had enough money to live, and when I did, it always ended up running out.

There's never been a moment in my life where I haven't been strapped for cash.

I came from a family of farmers who lived in a poor village.

There were seven of us all together. We'd get up with the sunrise, look after the animals, and spend the day working on the farm. Day in and day out.

My parents didn't make very much, and it was all they could do just to feed the family. There was never a second course.

The one thing that set us apart from other families was that we had volumes of the Ancient Chronicles, a set of books which no magician should be without.

Apart from that, we were just a family of commoners; one of hundreds within the kingdom. Our parents would tell us time and time again:

"Money's value comes from the hard work you put in to earn it. Money that's earned by deceptive means is worthless."

"Never steal. Never trick people. The money you make that way will damage your value as a human being."

"You only need as much money as it takes to survive. The moment you start to save, you'll just want more and more of it."

But I disagreed with those ideas from an early age.

I knew making money dishonestly was bad.

I knew money was worth more when it was hard-earned.

What I didn't understand was why you shouldn't make more than you need.

Living on the bare minimum would keep you right where you were.

If your life solely depended on working every waking moment, you'd never have enough time.

All that money we made would go to feeding the family and the livestock, leaving very little left, if anything.

The moment we earned a fraction less, we starved. That happened often, and it was miserable.

And yet my parents never stopped smiling, even through the hard times. I often wondered why that was.

Was it really a source of joy for us to suffer and to have less than we needed?

Was clinging stubbornly to our impoverished lifestyle like this really the right choice?

The rich didn't need to worry about making enough every single day. The rich could eat whatever luxurious meals they wanted. So why weren't we allowed to aim for that, too?

Even though I asked my parents all of these questions, their replies were always the same.

"Human greed is a monstrous thing. The more you have, the more you want."

"When you have more money than you need, it means that someone else has suffered for your gains."

"One man's coin is not equal to another's. Human suffering is what plugs the gap between those values."

My parents must have learned these values from somewhere to be able to come up with such deep statements.

Apparently, before they became farmers, they were merchants. Merchants whose work made many people suffer.

To atone, they vowed never to make more than they needed ever again.

As for me, I didn't understand why that meant they had to put themselves through such hardship.

My older siblings always had to pick up the slack in the field.

My younger siblings were always left starving.

I hated it.

And so I dusted off those Chronicles and aimed to become a magician.

If I reached my goal, my parents wouldn't have to return to their hated merchant life.

As well as being paid for my work, I could help others.

Once I learned how to cast spells, I really started to enjoy magic.

I used it for my family and for people in the village, and they were all incredibly grateful for my help.

I never asked for money in return, so I didn't go against my parents' wishes, even though I needed to spend money to be able to use magic in the first place.

"You mustn't make any money with your new skills."

"Using your powers to serve others selflessly will give you the best life a person can lead."

To me, there was a limit on just how selfless someone should be. Just like before, I disagreed with their values, and my indignation grew by the day.

Were those ideas really strong enough that making people happy could keep you satisfied?

Was being a good person enough of a reason to keep you motivated?

Was steering clear of money enough to keep you pure and righteous?

Their ideals weren't enough for me. Maybe that was why I devoted so much of myself to studying magic. Throwing myself into that world of learning and new discoveries, I could forget about my empty belly, my suffering, and my parents' twisted worldview.

It was around that time that my talents were recognized by an official from the capital, and I was invited to attend the Royal Institute of Magic.

My family were happy to see me off, and so I went to study as hard as I could, so I could hone my skills as a magician and make things easier for them.

I worked and worked, barely leaving any time for sleeping. I gained more and more experience with magic, and both my practical and theory grades were good.

I was often scorned by jealous nobles for my background, but I never let it get to me. Their prejudices were nothing compared to the hardships I faced back home. Their cold insults were nothing compared to the chilling midwinter winds that froze the farmland. Their shallow hatred was nothing compared to the empty void of my stomach after a bad harvest.

I used to worry about whether I would be alive by the end of the week. Nothing they said or did could ever compare to that.

I was completely unaware of the fact that my parents borrowed the money to send me to the capital.

It wasn't a lot of money. Impoverished as they were, even they would be able to pay it back with a few years of hard work. As a magician, I would be able to pay it back in a matter of months.

If only the lender hadn't been corrupt.

The lender was a noble, and our village fell within the land he governed. The interest rates he imposed on his debtors were extortionate. He collected the interest on top of the usual taxes, and that amount grew year after year. Meanwhile, due to the lifestyle they pursued, my parents were buried deeper and deeper under that mountain of interest.

Eventually, they failed to make their payment. My youngest sister was taken as compensation.

My family always stuck to their values, and they put up with so much because of it. But this was something they couldn't accept. They protested against the injustice of it all.

That was a mistake.

My entire family was found guilty of treason and put to death. All of them apart from me, who still studied in the capital. It wasn't until days after I graduated that I learned what happened.

Once I found out, it was all over for me. There was nothing I could do. I had been completely powerless to stop any of it.

If only my family were rich.

If only my parents had let go of their past and saved their money carefully.

If only I had asked for payment, even if just a little bit, when I started using magic.

If only we had money, this tragedy would never have happened.

Because of my parents' misguided hubris, they never had a penny left over.

If only, if only, if only. Again and again, those now-impossible possibilities raced through my mind.

It was then that I finally turned my back on my parents' teachings and set my sights on money.

I heard it all. "Greedy," "miserly," "money-grubbing." Those words were directed at me so often that they lost any semblance of meaning.

Those people were wrong. So I flashed my wealth in front of them, using my money however I wanted to teach them a lesson. It was a total thrill, but an unsatisfying one.

Even though I had money *now*, it wouldn't bring my family back. It wouldn't bring my sister back.

Money was everything. I knew that now.

There was no deep meaning behind my decision to help out the noble kid who crossed my path that day.

I hated the noble class that had killed my family. I didn't care what happened to those monsters' kids, and so I didn't hesitate when the opportunity came to

leverage their lives for coin.

I hated everything about nobility, even now. So there must have been something that pushed me to help this kid out.

It must have been those words.

"I have to go rescue her."

I could hear it in his voice. The desire to save his family. To save his sister. The desire to do what I never could.

That was when the tiny wick of conscience that still lay in my heart began to spark. It told me to help him. To do what I could for him.

I made excuses for what I was about to do: just because I sympathized with him at that moment didn't mean I was about to grow attached, and this wasn't me trying to make up for what I put him through, either. I already did my time. My actions were already paid for, and anyway, I had it up to here with kidnapping and ransom as a career path. I wasn't sure why I wanted to help him or why I cared so much. Maybe it was just a temporary lapse in judgment.

All I knew was what was right in front of me: this noble kid, Arcus Raytheft, was trying to break out.

His fluffy silver hair shook frantically, and his crimson eyes blinked incessantly as he darted around. The way he moved and the color of those eyes reminded me of a baby rabbit.

It was strange. Though he was dressed just like any other noble boy, he carried himself more like a commoner. If nothing else, he definitely didn't *spea*k like an aristo. Speaking to him was like speaking to any kid from my village, and the conversation flowed smoothly.

"Hold it," I said.

"What's the matter?"

"We'll be wantin' to take this." I picked up the cloth (nominally a "blanket") from my bed.

Arcus frowned at me. "What would I need that for?"

“Lotsa things.” That would do for now. “So, whaddya know ’bout how this place is built?”

“Nothing at all.” Arcus smiled sheepishly up at me.

I could only sigh and wonder if he ever thought further than the next step ahead. Though I guess since he only got here, he wouldn’t know anything about the place yet.

“Well, like ya woulda seen on the way up, there’s guardrooms at every third floor, and there’s always five to seven guards in them at a time. They’ve all got weapons done up one way and down the other with seals, or they’re really strong magicians. Ya couldn’t beat ’em one on one, let alone five of ’em.”

“Hm...”

“Also, if ya try and go for ’em head-on, there’ll be like fifty more of ’em coming in from all sides in no time.” Though it was just an estimate, it was probably pretty accurate.

Arcus’s frown deepened. “Dammit. I don’t have enough aether to deal with that!”

“How many spells could ya cast?”

“Around ten mid-range ones... I wouldn’t wanna cast any more than that, since I’ll need enough to break through into that noble’s mansion.”

“That’s nothin’, you’re right. Actually, that’s worse than nothin’. I thought ya were from a military family or somethin’? Aren’t ya meant to have aether comin’ out your arse?”

Arcus hesitated. “I don’t have much aether. They cut me loose.”

He stared at the floor. Apparently, I hit a nerve. Now he was muttering about that “damned fop” and “crushing the Raytheft house.” It was kind of scary.

“Guess that’s your second weakness, after that girly face.”

“Sorry...”

“Nah. Havin’ weaknesses just makes ya more likable.” I picked Arcus up by the scruff of the neck so I could look him in the eye. He scowled and pouted at me

like a mischievous kitten, his limbs outstretched.

“I don’t wanna be liked by a kidnapper with an evil-looking face like yours!”

“Sbetter than lookin’ like a softie, though, ain’t it?” If he was going to be blunt with me, I was going to be blunt with him. “We could probably get about half of ’em with our magic combined, if we’re lucky.”

“Maybe I should start a fire, and we’ll escape in the panic?”

“So it’s arson now, is it? Would never have expected nothin’ like that from some blue-blood sprog.”

Arcus chuckled bashfully.

It wasn’t actually a bad idea, if not for the surroundings we had to work with.

“Snot a bad trick, but it ain’t gonna work. Look at the walls here.”

“They’re too strong, right?” Arcus knocked on one of them with his fist.

“Exactly. This whole building, ’part from the more modern bits, was built in the days when the Elder Tongue was common speech. They don’t break, and I’d reckon they don’t burn.” I looked at Arcus’s face, hoping he had something clever to say. I wouldn’t have been surprised if *he* could set them on fire, but he shook his head.

Despite the hurdles in front of us, Arcus’s determination was still as strong as ever. “Let’s just go as far as we can for now.”

“Huh? And then what? If we move without thinkin’, we’ll just be in more of a fix later! They’ll chuck us somewhere leagues worse than this hole!”

“I have an idea or two, but I wanna get out of here so that I can see how this place is built.”

“Makes sense, I guess.”

His actions were reckless, but I was starting to see there was some sort of basic plan behind them. I figure all magicians have a trick or two kept back-pocket for just such and such a situation, which they only reveal at the very last minute. I knew this kid was no exception, especially if he was planning to storm a noble house...

Suddenly, a question came to mind.

“By the way, what’s your stance on keeping the guards alive... or not?”

“Well, this place is pretty well-sealed. If I need to, I could always conjure up some toxic aerosols.”

“Toxic what-what?”

“It’s like poison that spreads through the air, and if you breathe it in, you faint. You’ve heard of people getting sick and fainting at volcanoes or mines, right? It’s kinda like that.”

I had heard things like that. Some of those people even ended up dying.

“Spretty terrifyin’ that ya know how to do that...”

“I won’t actually do it, though. It’d be way too savage, and I don’t wanna cause a massacre or anything...”

“There’s a good lad.”

“As long as I have other options, that is,” Arcus added.

I understood. He was willing to place the life of his sister above the lives of strangers. I guess that’s the kind of stock they raise in a warmongering family like his.

The garish Sol Glasses lighting the corridor like the midday sun bleached the walls white. As we bore down on the stairs, the other cells’ occupants called out to us.

“Let us out, too!”

“Take us with you!”

“You ain’t gettin’ out.”

“When the guards notice, you’re done for!”

We ignored them, but the next moment we heard footsteps approaching. It wasn’t any of those prisoners, of course. It was a guard on patrol.

“Looks like we got our first customer!”

“The first of many to come,” Arcus said with a sigh.

We quickly hid ourselves behind a corner. Holding my breath, I waited until the guard was just within reach...

“Capable Cloth of Algol. Envelop the rabbits and does; bundle them, tie them, and silence them at once.”

Artglyphs surrounded the cloth, which immediately wrapped itself tightly around the guard’s upper half.

This was *Algol’s Suffocating Cloth*.

The guard’s voice was muffled by the material, rendering his words almost inaudible. No matter how much he struggled, the magical cloth clung to him relentlessly until, after a short while, he lost consciousness.

“That’s an... interesting spell,” Arcus commented.

“Says the kid who fights with trash. Although, since I saw that spell of yours, I started experimentin’ with the same kinda stuff myself.”

“Sounded like you’ve been boning up on *The Spiritual Age*. ‘Algol’s Week of Farming: Tuesday’s Harvest.’”

“That’s the one.”

Arcus pinned my spell down chapter and verse. The amount of knowledge that baby-faced head of his held was really something else. Even a graduate of the Institute or a member of the Guild couldn’t pick it apart so easily. Arcus’s knowledge must have been at the level of a state magician already—albeit one who was only just starting out.

“If you can make spells like that, how come you decided to become a kidnapper?” asked Arcus.

“This and that, y’know. ‘Sides, that was my first gig kidnapping.”

“Oh, yeah. I think you mentioned that at the time.”

“Did I?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I guess ya got a better memory than me, kid.”

“I *do* have a good memory. I could recite exactly what was said that night, if

you want.”

“Huh. Must be a helluva life to be able to remember stuff like that.” Part of me was sick of Arcus being such a genius, to be honest. It probably came across in my tone.

It wasn’t just his breadth of knowledge, but how quickly he picked stuff up. He was creative and had a powerful memory to boot. If only he had as much aether as the rest of his family, he’d probably be praised as some kind of god. I still wonder why that was the only part of him that fell short.

“Is someone there?!” A second guard called out from the depths of the hallway.

My mind began to whirr into motion as I started to work out how we’d deal with this one.

“Help! One of the guards collapsed!” Arcus suddenly cried out.

“What?!” Footsteps echoed as the guard approached.

He rushed toward us until he was close enough to see the fallen guard and Arcus kneeling there pretending to help him. The new guard faltered. It was obvious that he was struggling to decide whether he should prioritize helping his colleague or securing the escaped prisoner. *Was* this kid even a prisoner? The questions running through his head were plain to see.

Seeing my chance, I prepared another *Algol’s Suffocating Cloth*. This guard met the same fate as the first and tumbled on top of him.

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing?!” Another guard appeared, brandishing his truncheon at us.

He was fast. His armor must have been carved with seals to enhance his physical abilities. I ripped away my cloth from the fallen bodies as soon as I could, but I wasn’t going to make it.

“Leave it to me.” Arcus fell to his knees and pointed his finger at the guard before muttering a spell.

With his focus on me, the guard reacted too slowly, not realizing that Arcus was also a threat.

“Black Bullet. Keep the pale horse galloping through the skies in the blink of Death’s eye.”

The next moment, a loud bang exploded through the air. Before I knew what was happening, the third guard collapsed. He rolled onto the floor and, as I watched, began to huddle up and writhe in agony.

A pool of blood spread out between his body and the Tower’s snow-white floor. A chill raced through me. How had he done this? I didn’t know. That was what scared me the most.

The spell damaged the guard and the guard alone, meaning it was fully offensive in nature. At the same time, I saw nothing. One minute the guard was standing, and the next he was down.

“Sorry about that. A healing spell should patch you right up, though,” Arcus told the whimpering guard.

He used a handkerchief to gag the guard before tying his hands behind his back. He then turned back to me. Right. I couldn’t afford to stand here in shock.

We ran down the hallway, and I glanced over my shoulder. The guard was still writhing in pain. There was a small, round wound on his leg, but that did nothing to help me figure out what Arcus did.

I’d seen all sorts of magic in my life. Whether from the students or lecturers at the Institute or larger spells performed by magicians whose names were known across the kingdom. All sorts. Nothing like that.

I thought and thought, but I couldn’t come up with a way to recreate it. Whatever Arcus based it on, it must have been from a different country entirely. The phrases he used, too: *“Death’s eye,” “pale horse”*... I’d never heard those before.

“What the heck was that spell?” I asked as we raced to the next landing.

“I made it. Though the phrasing could probably use a bit of work.” Arcus sighed.

“Ya say that like it’s nothin’!”

Magicians didn’t tend to show off their original spells if they didn’t need to.

They were usually saved only for dire situations, to prevent others from copying them. If someone were to try and copy the spell Arcus just cast... Actually, maybe that wasn't a concern. The spell itself was invisible. Even imagining what happened was an impossible task, making it impossible to mimic, too. After all, picturing a spell's effects was just as important as choosing the right words if you wanted your spell to be successful.

Whatever Arcus cast, it was incredible. Just like the girl I went after that day, he was impressive in his own right. It blew my mind that there was a human alive who could cast something like that as if it was nothing.

We made it down ten floors or so, fighting off guards as we went. At that point, Arcus had burnt through half of his aether, and so we stopped to take a break. We didn't have much time to panic about our next move, but we couldn't keep up this level of effort the whole way, either.

The prisoners inside the cells shouted when they saw us. There were those asking for our help and others trying to slow us down, but in both cases, it wouldn't be long before the guards below heard them and made their way here to see what was going on.

We took care of every single guard on our way to stop them calling for reinforcements, but we didn't know when that might change.

We crept forward to scope out where we were heading.

All of a sudden, we heard prisoners' voices. Attempted break-outs were rare, so it was no wonder they were causing a fuss. But then, all at once, the voices cut short.

It was so quiet you could hear a pin drop. So quiet, you'd think there was nobody left in the building at all. Arcus frowned, clearly as confused as I was.

"What are you two doing?"

A woman's voice called out behind us.

Arcus and Cazzy were in the middle of their escape from the Holy Tower. Arcus was peering around a corner to see what was ahead when he heard a voice from behind. They were too far from the occupied cells for it to be a

prisoner. Not only that, but it was a young, innocent, female voice—not something he expected to hear in a place like this.

Arcus turned around, still not sure what he was expecting. There, he saw a young girl sitting in something resembling a wheelchair. She had long, light blue hair and blue eyes to match. From her appearance, Arcus guessed she was around five or six years older than him.

That wasn't the part of her appearance that struck him the most. Her hands, arms, and legs were tightly bound by white leather straps. It made her look like a mummy. Odder still, she was the only one around. How did she get here if there was nobody to push her?

As if she was reading Arcus's mind, the girl smirked smugly. He felt Cazzy move into a defensive stance beside him.

"Who're ya?"

"Me? I'm a prisoner, just like you. Unlike you, you sneaky fox, I'm under much stricter security."

"A prisoner?" Cazzy repeated, incredulous.

It made sense. She was wearing the inmate uniform under her bonds, and apart from anything else, it wouldn't make sense for a guard to be tied up like this. Although if she was under tight security as she said, Arcus couldn't fathom how she made it here.

"Don't worry. I'm not here to drop you in it," she said, noticing Cazzy bracing himself.

"Maybe not, but still..." he replied.

"So? Mind answering my question? What are you two doing?"

"Escaping," Arcus answered.

"Escaping?" The girl frowned, taking her time to digest the word. Her eyes narrowed, as if she was thinking through each letter individually.

The next moment, the wheels on her chair started to move by themselves. Either they were under some sort of spell, or they had seals on them. The wheelchair didn't stop until she was practically nose-to-nose with Arcus, after

which she stared at his face curiously.

“You aren’t a prisoner, are you?”

“No, I’m not. I’m—”

“Oh, look at you trying to lower your voice! You know it doesn’t really suit your face, right?”

“...As I was saying...”

“Oh, I didn’t mean to offend!” The girl giggled. “I just thought you were a girl, that’s all, little bunny!”

“‘Bunny’...?”

Did he really look like a bunny? Maybe it was the silver hair and red eyes.

The girl made no move to question their identities, as if it didn’t interest her at all to know who they were. Even though Arcus was desperate to know who *she* was, somehow he found himself unable to ask. The way she didn’t look at them head-on and her creepy smile made her seem so ominous somehow. Yet she was charming in a way Arcus couldn’t put his finger on. The way she seemed to look down on him sent a shiver crawling up his spine, as if she was moments away from pouncing and devouring him.

“So what’s a little bunny wabbit like you doing trying to escape in the first place?”

“I was taken here unfairly. I just wanna leave, that’s all.”

The girl studied him closely as he spoke. “Those are some fancy clothes you’re wearing. Might you be a noble bunny? If so, it’s awfully strange you were taken here. Unless... you got yourself involved in somebody’s business? Somebody very powerful?”

“Y-Yeah...”

“I knew it. Oh my, what a fix! A nice boy like you in a dump like this.” She shook her head and sighed, clearly disapproving of the marquess’s actions, to say the least. “Why don’t you just wait here, little bunny? If you’re a noble, surely somebody will come and fetch you sooner or later.”

“It’ll take too long. I have to get out as soon as I can.”

The girl looked at Cazzy questioningly.

“Yup. I’m helpin’ him and all.”

“But you are a prisoner yourself,” she pointed out.

“Nah. I already did my time ages ago, see.”

“Oh. In that case, you must be the freeloader everybody’s talking about.”

“You mean you’re famous?” Arcus asked.

“Quiet, kid!”

The girl closed her eyes and nodded, apparently satisfied with their explanation.

“Oy! What are you lot doing down here?!” An angry shout suddenly echoed from the end of the hallway.

Arcus looked up to see a guard wielding a truncheon. He was so caught up in the girl’s conversation that he hadn’t noticed him.

“Dammit,” Cazzy spat.

“We’ll move according to the plan,” Arcus said, referring to what he and Cazzy put together just moments earlier.

“This is the Holy Tower! Don’t think you can es...cape?!” The guard, who had been running just moments earlier, slowed to a halt. His face drained of its color, and he began to tremble, as if someone had walked over his grave.

“N-No! Wh... What are you doing here?!” The guard let out a wavering choke.

His erratic gaze led to a spot behind Arcus and Cazzy: the spot where the girl in the wheelchair sat.

“I wonder,” she purred. “Am I here because I have to be? Because I want to be? Because I’d like to be? Because I’m forced to be? What do you think?”

The wheels of her wheelchair began to clatter to life again.

“St-Stay back! Stop! Stop, Rotterbell!” The guard held up his truncheon to fend her off, but his arm was shaking.

She didn't stop, of course. The guard inched slowly back.

"Foolish man. Do you really think you can stop me? Foolishly foolish fool... The whole lot of you are nothing but fools!"

"P-Pipe down!" the guard screamed.

The girl opened her mouth, her voice resounding as clearly as a bell.

"The mirage remains distant, yet the oasis comes ever closer. Merciless, oppressive, wicked. Grant me thy refreshing kiss. Thank you, my dear."

"N-N—!" Unable to finish, the soldier let out a gurgling groan before falling to the floor.

Arcus rushed over to check the damage. The guard was no longer fully conscious. Instead, his eyes were flung open with his pupils dilated, and he kept gasping over and over, fighting to fill his lungs. Cazzy narrowed his eyes at the girl.

"What the hell did ya do?"

"It's a simple spell. If you missed it, perhaps you'd like me to give another demonstration? *The mirage—*"

"N-Nah, you're all right..." Cazzy cut her off quickly.

As he struggled to comprehend what happened, Arcus continued to check over the fallen guard. If they left him, there was a chance he would die. The best way to work out what happened was to analyze the spell's phrasing.

Arcus spoke his thoughts aloud. "Is he... dehydrated?"

"Huh?" Cazzy said.

"I think that's it. I think that spell was designed to remove the water content in his body."

The mirage remains distant. An illusion which wouldn't come closer no matter how much you chased it.

Yet the oasis comes ever closer. An invitation for water to come to the magician.

Grant me thy refreshing kiss. A request for a "kiss"—something important to

the target.

Every clause in the spell created an image of a dry desert, leading Arcus to believe that it was designed to desiccate its target. As he voiced his thoughts out loud, the girl smiled.

“I have no idea what you mean by ‘dehydration,’ but you seem to have the right idea. Humans are fragile creatures. As soon as you take away what they need to function, they collapse. Oh, what a wretched man. I should just chop up his corpse right now...” All at once, the sweet smile on her face turned sinister.

“Kinda creepy, but okay...” Cazzy muttered.

“This doesn’t look fatal, though,” Arcus remarked.

The girl might have used a weaker version of the spell, but either way it looked like the guard would be fine. Arcus still didn’t want to leave him in this state, though, so he gave him some water to drink before setting the guard’s head down once more.

“Little bunny.”

Arcus turned around when he heard himself being called, only to see the girl’s face inches away from his. At some point, the bonds had come away from her arms, allowing her to move them freely. She brought her hands up to Arcus’s face and cupped his cheeks in them. Her slender fingers felt soft on his skin, and she was even more beautiful from up close.

“I like smart little bunny wabbits. Do you think you could quench my thirst?”

Arcus jumped backward, shocked by the sweet breaths that tickled his face. The girl’s pale pink lips twisted into a playful smile.

“Oh my. Have you come to dislike me?”

“Wh... Who are you?”

“I’m a prisoner. I may be in a little more of a bind than most, but I can still move freely.”

It was then that Arcus remembered what he was supposed to be doing.

“I’m sorry, but we’ve really gotta go,” he explained.

“Yes, you do. I apologize for keeping you.” Her tone suddenly darkened. “Listen to me, little bunny. It isn’t easy to get out of here. There are a lot of guards down below, you know.”

“I know. But I—”

“...Have to leave. I understand. You’ve captured my interest, and so I shall lend you a hand.”

“What?”

“Perhaps I shall go and pay a visit to the foolish guards over there. That’s bound to cause a stir.”

“Are you sure?” Arcus asked. “I mean, won’t you get in trouble?”

“No, I shall be treated exactly as I have always been. The only person able to punish me in the entire kingdom is His Majesty himself.”

She knew the King? With each passing moment, Arcus’s curiosity about her grew and grew.

“In return,” she continued, “you shall tell me how to get out of here. Is that clear?” Without waiting for an answer, she left them, the clattering of her wheelchair echoing through the hallway.

“She was... weird,” Cazzy finally said.

“At least she’s on our side,” Arcus replied. “Hey... she never told us her name.”

“I wouldn’t go after her and ask if I was ya. ’Sprobably best not to get too involved,” said Cazzy, sticking his tongue out.

He was right. Anyone who saw her would instinctively want to stay away. Arcus was curious about her all the same. Who was she, and where did that dangerous allure of hers come from?

After watching her leave, Cazzy and Arcus set off once more. As though already prepared for their presence, the next guard didn’t show himself immediately, which was smart. Arcus paused, trying to think about the best course of action.

“Is that you, Master Arcus?”

The hidden guard knew his name?

Arcus quickly stopped Cazzy, who was preparing to attack. “Noah?”

“At your service.”

Noah rounded the corner. He pulled off his engraved helmet and gave his hair a quick shake to put it back into place. Here he was: the indigo beauty himself.

“Ya know him?” Cazzy asked.

“He’s my servant.”

Noah smiled. “I am glad to see you are safe.”

“Thanks. My plan was kinda messed up, though.”

“I have been in contact with Craib, and I believe he should already be doing his thing, though I doubt that is much consolation.”

“Yeah... What are you doing here, anyway?”

“I saw you being taken away, and so I followed after the mercenaries before waiting for my chance to inveigle myself.”

“Damn. It can’t be easy getting into this place,” Arcus said.

“Indeed it wasn’t. However, I caught a lucky break when the number of guards suddenly dwindled.”

“Huh? That’s weird, though. Guards don’t just suddenly up and leave or nothin’!” Cazzy said.

Noah frowned at Cazzy. “Who is this gentleman, Master Arcus?”

“Uh... he’s helping me escape.”

“He appears to be a prisoner himself.”

“Sure am! Or I guess, I was. ’Sbeen more than two years since I did my time, though.” Cazzy stuck his tongue out teasingly. Noah’s frown deepened.

“Are you sure it is wise to trust him?”

“I dunno right now. I just know that it’s better to have help.”

"Name's Cazzy," Cazzy introduced himself.

"I am Noah. I work under Master Arcus as his servant." Though Noah's tone was friendly enough, he still had his guard up.

"If you're so worried, you can keep an eye on him."

"Ah, yes. Just another thing to add to my long list of duties."

"Huh? Didn't my uncle say I could trust you with my life? That includes looking out for shady guys, right?"

"Craib says a lot of things which I'd rather he didn't."

"You look like you had a hard time getting here," Arcus said.

"I did. In fact, I should like to request a raise for this whole rigmarole."

"What? I thought you enjoyed this kinda thing?" Though Arcus pointed a teasing finger at him, Noah managed to keep a straight face, as always.

Meanwhile, Cazzy was still concerned with Noah's earlier remark about the guards.

"It don't make no sense..."

"It appears that whoever is in charge here sent around half of them away," Noah explained.

Talk about a stroke of luck.

Cazzy still seemed suspicious.

"I get why you're here, and I get the girl before was just crazy, but... ya sure ya ain't got some sort of deal with a devil, kid?"

"If I do, I don't remember making it."

At that moment, they heard noises coming from the direction the girl in the wheelchair went.

"What's all this ruckus?" Noah asked with a frown.

"Must be the girl from before. I guess she really does wanna help us," said Cazzy.

Noah shot Arcus another puzzled glance.

“There was this girl who showed up just before you got here,” he explained. “Some girl in a wheelchair. She said she’d help us out by causing a diversion.”

“Was she a prisoner, too?” Noah asked slowly.

“I think so, yeah... Oh, actually, that guard who’s lyin’ there called her “Rotterbell” or somethin’,” Cazzy said.

“R-Rotterbell? Could you mean the Alicia Rotterbell? *Dry Spell Rotterbell?*” Noah stiffened.

“You know her?” Arcus asked.

“She was appointed as a state magician last year. However, she caused a lot of... problems, and was deemed too dangerous to be allowed to roam freely.”

“Huh? Looked to me like she could walk around freely just fine,” Cazzy remarked.

“I’m sure there’s some kinda reason behind it,” said Arcus. “Still, I can’t believe she’s a state magician.”

“Look, that’s interestin’ and all, but we really gotta get goin’. The guards’ll be here soon.”

Arcus could already hear their faint approaching footsteps. It sounded like a lot of them were coming, too. Immediately, the three of them slid into a nearby room to hide.

“It doesn’t look as though getting out will be an easy affair, either,” Noah murmured.

“D’you think we could break through them?” Arcus asked.

“It would be a possibility, but no doubt a time-consuming one.”

“Right. In that case... Are there any windows around here, Cazzy?”

“Should be at the end of the hallway... but if you wanna try climbin’ down, I gotta tell ya it ain’t a good idea.”

“No, that wasn’t what I was thinking. I’m not looking to die here.”

“So, what *are* you planning?” Noah asked.

Arcus allowed a dramatic pause before giving his answer. “We’re going to fly.”

As he expected, both Noah and Cazzy gawked at him.

Cazzy was the first to raise a loud objection.

“I think I misheard ya. Did ya say... ‘fly’?”

“You heard me fine. We’ll get to a nearby window and jump down. Using magic, of course.”

If pushing through the guards and leaving the Tower from the inside wasn’t an option, they would have to use the outside. Arcus never expected he would need to use this trick, but he was certainly glad he looked into it now.

Neither Noah nor Cazzy looked too pleased by the idea. Cazzy was frowning as deep as anything, and Noah’s face was slightly stiffer than usual.

Was my idea really that crazy?

Now that Arcus thought about it, he’d never come across anything in his studies about using magic to fly. Flying was supposed to be one of humanity’s greatest dreams, and yet in this world, man seemed to have made no attempt at such a feat, despite having access to magic. Surely Arcus couldn’t have been the first person to come up with such an idea?

Cazzy broke the uncomfortable silence with a sigh. “Listen, kid. Ya know that magicians’ve been lookin’ into this whole flyin’ thing, and they ain’t ever found a way to do it, right?”

“What? Really?”

“Master Arcus, if I may. At this point in time, it has been acknowledged that using magic to fly is impossible. Though I have heard of many attempts to create such a spell, they have all ended in failure.”

“Huh? Doesn’t that just mean their spells were badly made?”

“The spells weren’t the issue, kid. Even quotin’ direct from the Chronicles, they never came up with nothin’ good.”

“In terms of picturing the spells, they used all sorts of flying creatures and

their movements as reference. However, none of it worked, and it was eventually decided that the divine spirits must not want us to fly. With the exception of a certain emperor, of course..." Noah added, although he didn't elaborate, since it was irrelevant.

"That doesn't make any sense," Arcus protested.

"Course it makes sense! 'Cause everyone knows it!" Cazzy retorted.

"What about *psychokinesis*, then? How does that work? That spell sends stuff flying through the sky, too."

"Nah, that's just like throwin' somethin', except with magic."

"Huh? Is that what everyone thinks? What about you, Noah?"

"Yes."

"What?!"

Arcus couldn't believe it. When he used *psychokinesis*, he always pictured it as some sort of psychic power, but now everyone was telling him they were imagining using their hands to move the object?

Now that he thought back, he always seemed to be able to move objects with a lot more freedom than the other people he witnessed using the spell.

Perhaps it wasn't so much *what* you imagined that affected the spell, but more *the way* in which you imagined it. Arcus's visions reflected the fundamental rules he learned in the man's world.

Universal gravitation. The world's gravitational pull. Inertia. It was on these principles that Arcus created and pictured his spells. Did that make his individual approach completely different to everyone else's?

"What do you two think it is that makes stuff fall to the ground?"

That was the most important thing to establish here. Was the law of gravity as universally known here as it was in the man's world?

It was Noah who answered. "Ascension and descent is not something you learn about until your fifth year at the Institute."

"Ascension and descent?" Arcus echoed.

“Mmhmm.”

Arcus’s curiosity was piqued.

“It means the attributes which objects make use of to go up and down,” Cazzy added.

“Attributes?”

“He is correct,” Noah said. “Objects move up and down because they are attracted to other objects with the same base attribute.

“We humans are attracted to the ground’s attribute, see. That’s why we fall toward the ground.

“Consider the following spell, if you will.

“O grand presence, release the chains and pins that hold me down to Mother Earth. Withdraw your heavenly protection over the ground. Take away the holy resting place of Aeolia’s birds, no longer required. Blue of the endless heavens, black of the confined earth we call home, grant me the viridian feathers of birds as they make toward the sun.”

Artglyphs sprung up around Noah’s feet as he brought his incantation to an end.

“Release the chains and pins that hold me down” was simple enough. In other words, break the barriers which held him to the ground.

After a pause, Noah’s body started to lift from the floor, but it only lasted a brief moment. He fell back down in an instant. In all honesty, he could have jumped to achieve the same result. He was in the air for the same amount of time after all.

“That spell was so... long,” Arcus said.

“The spell is long because of how powerful it is,” Noah explained.

“I’m surprised ya got it out without stutterin’ or nothin’. I woulda bit my tongue halfway through.” Cazzy gave an exaggerated demonstration.

“Noah was top of his class at the Institute!” Arcus said.

“Ah, makes sense. I went to the Institute, too.”

“Oh, really? Now that I think of it, I haven’t yet asked your name...”

In any case, Noah’s spell was a failure. It sounded like it negated the attributes of the ground to cause him to float. Now that Arcus thought of it, that man had read something similar in his own world.

“That’s it! Aristotle!” Arcus suddenly exclaimed.

“Ari-what now?” Cazzy asked.

It was just like the ideas of the four elements put forward by the ancient philosopher Aristotle. According to him, these elements were what influenced objects to both rise and fall. Objects wanted to return to where they came from. For example, stones fell because they wanted to return to the ground, while fire rose as it wanted to return to the sky. It was these elements which dictated the rising and falling of objects.

Acceleration was covered by the theory: the closer these objects were to their origin, the happier they were, which caused them to fall or rise even faster. Of course, to a civilization where the theory of gravity and universal gravitation was common knowledge, this talk of elements would sound like utter nonsense. If the ideas Noah’s spell was based on were similar, then it was no wonder it failed. Arcus couldn’t take it for granted that the laws of physics here and in the man’s world were the exact same, but if they were, he might be on to something.

“I think you’ve got it all wrong. Humans fall because of a force called gaia,” Arcus explained.

“Gaia?” Noah said.

“Right. It’s a force which pulls us toward the ground we’re standing on. It’s not that our bodies ‘belong’ to the planet. Instead, space-time deforms around the planet’s mass, and we fall into...” Arcus trailed off when he saw how Noah and Cazzy were staring at him like they couldn’t begin to fathom what he was talking about.

It was no wonder. Explaining gravity required a vast foundation of science that was only elementary in the man’s world, and he was probably using a lot of language they hadn’t heard before, either. Yet, if they didn’t understand what

he was getting at, they wouldn't have a clear enough picture to create a flying spell. At least the word "gaia" existing in the Elder Tongue was a good start, as it was close enough to the definition of gravity from the man's world.

How am I gonna tackle this?

Arcus's eyes fell on the cloth in Cazzy's hand.

"Cazzy, could you spread that out for me?" he asked.

"Huh? This?"

"Yep. You hold the other end, Noah. Then hold it out and keep it taut." Arcus swept his gaze around the room again. "When an object has mass, it curves the space around it. You'll be able to see that distortion if I put an object on the cloth. Watch."

Arcus found something to place on the cloth.

"Imagine that's the ground we're standing on, and the dent in the cloth underneath it is the warped space. The object is just like the planet we're on, except the planet is huge, and therefore so is the dent. Us humans are being pulled into that dent, or that curved space."

"R-Right..." Cazzy didn't sound too sure.

Arcus knew that this explanation would be far too basic, but if he went into any more detail, he'd have to start talking about celestial objects, planets, and space. He didn't have the time for that right now.

"Basically, it's not that our bodies are moving toward something unconsciously; instead, it's that the ground is pulling us toward it by creating this huge dent."

Noah, being who he was, instantly had a response prepared. "But Master Arcus, none of this is entirely clear. Are you quite sure your thinking is correct?"

"I don't know for sure..."

"What? Now you're tellin' us ya don't even know what you're on about?"

"No one fully understands how gravity works. That's why there are so many theories framed around the question. There's Aristotle's theory, which Noah

already explained, Galileo's laws of dynamics, Newton's law of universal gravitation, Buridan's theory of impetus, Einstein's general theory of relativity... There are even some theories that gravity doesn't exist at all."

There was no end to theories formed in search of the truth. It was likely a destination that would never be reached.

"What I'm sure of," Arcus continued, "is that the rules this world regards as correct are wrong. You're trying to make spells that negate these 'attributes' you speak of, but those spells are based on misguided foundations, which is why no one's been able to use magic to fly."

"Yeah, but..." Cazzy began.

"Also, it's not like we'll be making a spell from scratch. I've actually already got one," Arcus said.

"You're kiddin'..."

"Are you quite serious?"

"Of course. Watch this.

"O, creatures great and small who move and crawl along the ground: revolt against the pull of Hades, and disentangle yourselves from the snares of space. Rebel against gravity, and push back against it. Find your wings, and become as one that soars above the skies."

Arcus's body began to float up with the artglyphs swirling sparsely around him.

"What do you think? I can't really move, but I'm not falling, at least. Doesn't that mean that my explanation is closer to the truth than yours?"

Noah and Cazzy stared at him, their mouths agape. Arcus turned onto his front and started to move his arms and legs as though he were swimming. Still, he remained floating in the air. He still felt a little weight in his body, though, so he was sure there was still something missing in his understanding.

"By golly, ya really are flyin'! And... And for more than three seconds, too!"

Unlike Noah's spell, Arcus's showed no sign of letting him fall at all. Just then, he heard a quiet chuckle.

“You never fail to impress me, Master Arcus, no matter how much time passes.”

“I just wish I could move how I wanted. I guess I’ll just have to fix it up. Not only the spell, but my understanding of the theory behind it...”

Noah continued to smile, poking at Arcus’s body curiously with his eyes sparkling.

“Remember what I was saying about gaia?” Arcus said. “The idea that the ground pulls us toward it, not that we’re heading toward the ground. If you keep that rule in mind, you should be able to fly, too.”

“W-Wait a sec! Fine, I get it, you’re flyin’, right? B-But I don’t think I’m ready to try it out for myself yet!”

He never used the spell before. Therefore, he didn’t know how much aether he needed to pull it off. To work it out, he would need a good amount of practice with that particular spell. Arcus, of course, had a solution.

“Have you got one with you, Noah?”

“Yes. Right here.”

“Nice one!” Arcus wondered how he ever managed without Noah before.

His servant pulled an aethometer from his breast pocket. Cazzy instantly frowned at it.

“Whazzat?”

“That’s a device which measures aether.”

“A what now?” Unsurprisingly, Cazzy didn’t pick up on its meaning immediately. But once he did, his expression changed instantly. “W-Wait, no... you’ve gone too far this time! This time ya gotta be pullin’ my leg!”

“I’m not, I promise. Watch this. Release a little aether and... the stuff inside it expands!”

Cazzy watched, his eyes wide, as the Sorcerer’s Silver inside the graduated wooden frame expanded.

“When did they come up with these?” he asked.

“This is Master Arcus’s invention.”

“What, this kid? No way! I gotta be dreamin’...” Cazzy trailed off, apparently at a loss for words.

Meanwhile, Arcus took a paper and pen from Noah and began to break down his spell.

“All together, this spell requires 427 mana. Each word needs 30 or 25. From ‘Revolt’ until ‘space,’ we need 170, and “rebel against gravity” worked best at about 62 mana. That part was kinda tricky to work out. From there...”

Arcus continued, noting down the mana requirements for each clause of the spell. Noah himself had been working with the aethometer for over two years now, and had become very good at judging how much mana a spell required.

“Allow me to start,” Noah said before reciting Arcus’s spell himself.

Sure enough, just like Arcus’s, Noah’s body began to float.

“O-Oh... Oh my.” Noah frowned, as though he couldn’t quite comprehend that the spell worked. “I must say this really *would* be much more enjoyable if one could move around freely.”

“I could probably make that happen, but the spell would end up twice as long as the one you cast earlier. Plus, it’d be difficult to control the movements themselves.

“Not to mention that the aether required for such a spell would make it far too impractical to see any use. Instead of adding more words or phrases, the existing ones would need to be stronger. But that’s way too complicated to sort out right now,” said Arcus.

“I shall look forward to seeing what you can come up with.” Noah smiled.

“You mean ‘we.’ I’ll need you to help me out, y’know.”

“But of course.”

Arcus made his way toward the window. At this height, the wind was incredibly strong, and there was no doubt that it would make things more difficult. He positioned himself by holding onto the windowsill, still not quite comfortable with the floating sensation. He felt like one of the astronauts he’d

seen on television in the man's world. They often held onto parts of the space station's interior to keep themselves steady in the zero gravity.

Cazzy, meanwhile, was looking out of the window and down toward the ground with a gulp.

Arcus wasn't exactly steady on his feet, either. Suppose his spell stopped working halfway through, just like Noah's spell from before. The moment that happened, there was no saving him.

The possibility clung to his mind like a frightened animal.

The wind howled beneath them. Saying they would simply fly down was easy enough. Actually doing it was a different matter.

"Aargh! All right, here goes then!"

Without wasting another breath, Cazzy recited the spell from the notebook. Again and again he recited it, until he finally committed it to memory. Then, he used the aethometer to measure how much aether he needed to cast it. It didn't take him long to work it out at all, and then, he was ready for the real thing.

"O, creatures great and small who move and crawl along the ground. Revolt against the pull of Hades, and disentangle yourselves from the snares of space. Rebel against gravity, and push back against it. Find your wings, and become as one that soars above the skies...—C'mon, lemme fly!"

One Small Step.

Artglyphs rose up around Cazzy, creating a warm, gentle breeze that swirled around him. The next moment, his body lifted into the air too.

"I-I'm really flyin'!" he gasped, unable to believe his eyes.

"See?" Arcus said.

"Yeah, but, d'ya really think it's safe? What if it runs out halfway down the Tower?"

"We'll be fine." Arcus took Cazzy, who was still panicking, by the arm, leading him out through the window.

The three of them floated there for a while to get used to the new sensation.

“To get back to the ground, all you need to say is ‘down,’ and you’ll start falling gently,” explained Arcus. “You’ll speed up the more times you say it, so you’ll wanna take it easy. Just say it whenever I do for now.”

And so they began the terrifying descent, suspended in the air without even a parachute.

The night was deepening. Stars twinkled brightly in the sky, occasionally blocked out by the passing purple clouds. The Sol Glasses on the ground shone brightly, as though greeting the sky above. Their light bounced off the glass panes of buildings, creating their own blanket of stars.

There was a reason this capital was known as the City of Starlight by the neighboring kingdoms, and it was all thanks to the city’s glass factories and advanced seal technology. Not only was it a beautiful sight to behold, but it meant the citizens were able to work late into the night under the illumination, accelerating progress even further.

Needless to say, the capital’s largest prison, the Holy Tower, also made use of Sol Glasses. They were good for spotting both intruders and would-be escapees in the darkness. There was one particular person who was able to spot those attempted escapes faster than anybody else.

“Oh, thank goodness they made it out!” Arcus’s friend Sue let out a sigh of relief as she watched the Tower from one corner of its courtyard.

Arcus and his servant ran across the grounds. There wasn’t a guard in sight, meaning their escape was unnoticed.

“Are you sure about this?” a woman standing next to Sue asked.

She was a sprightly woman in her mid-twenties. Her long, rose-colored hair was tied back in a ponytail, and her purple eyes were half-hidden behind small, silver-rimmed and square-framed glasses. Her fur-trimmed cloak gave away her noble status, although more conspicuous was the highly decorative sword that lay on her hip.

She had a pretty face, and her lips seemed permanently sealed in a tight line,

as though they wouldn't allow a superfluous word to pass them. She gave off an air of frigidity.

This was Lisa Lauzei. She was the gifted Chief Officer of the Surveillance Office.

"Yes. Thank you for your help, too. Everything went as well as I hoped," Sue said.

"Still, I wasn't expecting a request in the middle of the night to loosen security here."

"It was the only way to let Arcus escape without attracting too much attention."

"Exactly. With the number of friends that man has in the Tower, even my hands are tied."

It was common for nobles to plant their own people in high places to keep themselves safe. For some, it allowed their crimes to receive a lighter sentence. For others, it made any jail time more pleasant. When nobles used their powers in such a way, it was all too easy for them to slip through even the Ministry of Justice's toughest nets.

If the country's processes were more tightly regulated, this sort of thing wouldn't happen as much, but that would involve tightening up the nobles' current powers, which they wouldn't take lying down. History already told of what would happen then. Nobles would flee the country, searching for somewhere they could take power again. Meanwhile, the masses would take over the kingdom, and it would crumble from the inside, much like the former kingdom of Dariostate. That was one of the difficulties of feudalism.

"I still can't believe he got sent to the Tower! I wonder who's behind this," Sue said.

Lisa stayed silent.

Sue realized she wasn't getting a straight answer unless she asked a direct question. "Do you know anything about this, Lisa?"

"No."

Sue wasn't sure she believed her.

She came to Lisa requesting her help after she heard her friend was captured. Not just captured, but imprisoned in the Holy Tower. There were measures in place to prevent its clientele from running amok. Their teeth or tongues were pulled out, and in some cases, their jaws were broken. As soon as she heard the news, Sue panicked. Deciding that finding out the reason behind Arcus's capture could wait, she asked Lisa to either set him free or allow his escape.

Now that he had, she returned to the question of what he was doing there in the first place. The Arcus that Sue knew was anything but a hardened criminal. Quite apart from his upstanding behavior, having a noble child imprisoned in the Tower at a moment's notice was unheard of.

It was clear to her that he got involved in something he shouldn't have—something run by somebody powerful enough to throw him in the Tower in the blink of an eye without being questioned. An opponent that powerful meant that Sue had no choice but to turn to a high-ranking noble for help.

As Chief Officer, there was no way Lisa was clueless. It was her department's job to look out for this sort of thing, after all.

"Is the Surveillance Office doing anything about this?" Sue asked.

It was all too strange. If this was a result of a conflict between two houses, it was the office's job to intervene or at least investigate. Yet this time, they had done nothing, despite the fact that they were usually champing at the bit for even a whiff of conflict or corruption.

The only conclusion was that their inaction was because of somebody or something exerting their influence over them. Sue was certain something was lurking in the shadows. It was almost like she could hear it creeping up on her now. All of this couldn't have come at a worse time.

The Surveillance Office wasn't acting, but Lisa failed to answer Sue's question. Did she herself not know the answer? Did no one tell her, or was she just keeping quiet? Did she really believe Sue would drop it if she didn't answer?

She was wrong. Sue *needed* an answer, no matter what.

"Officer Lisa Lauzei. I'm only going to ask you once more. If you know

something, tell me. Don't think you can deceive me." Sue, full name Susia Algucia, sighed.

At her change in tone, Lisa instantly stiffened. "Don't be absurd!"

"Your silence only means you're keeping something from me. I know the Surveillance Office must know something about this."

"But there's no evidence to suggest—"

"At the very least, they must have a small fraction of information. How else would I have been told that Arcus was captured?"

"Mm..." Lisa's answer was noncommittal.

It seemed she was still unaware of what a non-answer meant here. How dare she stay silent on a matter that concerned Susia's dearest Arcus? Any delay in answering wasn't something Susia was likely to forget soon.

Susia slowly drew the sword that lay at her waist. She allowed her aether to boil up inside her, rushing to every last inch of her body. There was no way Lisa wouldn't feel it. The silver blade glinted in the moonlight, flicking its rays fiercely from its surface. The next moment, it was positioned against Lisa's neck. As it dug into the skin of her collarbone, a shock of fear shot through the older woman. It didn't escape Susia's notice.

"Lisa Lauzei. You are to look into the office's failing in this case very carefully. If you fail to carry out this investigation to the utmost, then you know what is to happen to your head, don't you?"

"Y-Yes! Yes, ma'am!"

"If you understand, I expect results." Susia reined in her overflowing aether.

At the same time, Lisa collapsed to the ground on all fours. She was gasping like she had just run a marathon.

With a sigh, Susia became Sue once more.

She smiled sweetly. "I can't wait to see what you come up with."

"M-Ma'am!" Lisa cried out, her face damp with sweat.

It seemed Sue scared her more than she thought, though at the same time,

she couldn't say she was too surprised. She waited for Lisa to regain her composure.

"I do wonder just how they managed to make it down the Tower," Lisa remarked. "It hasn't been long since his attendant made it in, and it should have taken even longer than that to climb all the way down."

"Maybe they climbed down from the outside," Sue suggested.

"That... doesn't sound all that realistic."

"Yeah. I wonder if Arcus came up with some cool new spell or something. I'll have to ask him about it!"

Though, if she did, she'd have to reveal that she knew about what happened tonight. How should she approach it? Sue's mind was already bursting with excitement. What spell had he used? Which phrases, and which words? If there was one thing she knew about Arcus, it was that his creativity knew no bounds.

Just then, Lisa beckoned to her. "This way, ma'am."

Sue followed her, stealing one last glance at Arcus over her shoulder. Though she was glad he was safe, there was one thing that didn't fail to capture her attention.

"Isn't that... the kidnapper? Why is he with Arcus?"

As well as his servant, Noah Ingwayne, Arcus was running with the man who tried to kidnap them. They seemed to be getting on well enough, from what she could tell, so maybe there was nothing to worry about, but...

Sue wasn't sure she had ever seen such a strange combination of people.

Having successfully escaped The Holy Tower, Arcus and his two companions raced through the night. They were already closing in on Gaston's estate now. It was visible in the distance, the tall building towering up behind a row of hedges. The light of Sol Glasses spilled out through the windows, while similar lamps illuminated the courtyard. It was so bright that Arcus had to squint no matter where he looked. It seemed a bit much, even in the name of security, but there was no doubt that it made sneaking into the estate much more difficult.

Noah, Cazzy, and Arcus peered over the stone wall and into the dazzling garden densely populated with statues.

“Ugh.” Cazzy’s distaste for the marquess’s aesthetic sense was clear. “So this tacky sparklin’ place belongs to a noble, yeah?”

“Yeah. The Marquess Cau Gaston,” said Arcus.

“Huh...” Cazzy fell silent, mulling over the name.

Arcus couldn’t blame him. They weren’t dealing with just any aristocrat here. This man was in charge of all the kingdom’s financial affairs. In the first place, Cazzy had only promised Arcus that he would help him escape the Tower and nothing more.

“It’s okay, Cazzy. Thanks for all your help. If you come to the Raytheft house later, I’ll be able to reward you... Cazzy?”

Cazzy had stopped responding. He looked down at Arcus, his expression calm and composed. It was a far cry from his usual cocky grin. What on earth could he be thinking?

“Whaddya guys plannin’ on doin’ here?”

“Huh? Like I said, I’m gonna beat up the marquess and save my sister.”

“He looks like a pretty big cheese. Have ya thought about what ya gonna do after?”

“I don’t have to. I’m just a kid, after all. I don’t need to worry about consequences.”

“Ya say you’re just a kid, but ya sure don’t act like one sometimes...”

“You’re telling me,” Noah pitched in. “I do fear for how he shall be in ten years time, if this is how he is *now*.”

“Quit it. We gotta save Lecia, and we gotta do it now!”

“Do not forget, Master Arcus, we have the option of waiting for Craib.”

“But he can’t do anything right away! It’ll take too long.”

“Indeed. If he was already able to act, he would have been in contact by now.”

“If you knew that, why did you ask?”

“I needed to make sure you were fully aware of our situation. That is also part of my role,” Noah replied calmly.

There was a good chance that Arcus’s desperation would cause him to forget the basic facts of what they were dealing with, so he did find Noah’s reminders helpful. His servant really did manage to think of everything.

“Hey, Arcus. Mind if I join ya guys for this bit?” Cazzy asked suddenly.

“What?”

“It’ll be easier if you’ve got more people on your side, right?”

“Sure, but... you *do* know who we’re taking on, don’t you?”

“Yeah, but you’re a noble, too. That comes with its advantages.”

“You’re getting ahead of yourself. I’m not even that high ranking, *plus* I’m not really technically nobility anymore...”

“Sure.” Apparently unconcerned, Cazzy climbed up over the stone wall and jumped down into one corner of the garden.

He was clearly raring to go. Arcus had no idea what led to this sudden burst of eagerness, but he wasn’t about to complain. Climbing up over the wall himself, he joined Cazzy in the garden.

“Careful, Master Arcus. There are mercenaries everywhere,” Noah warned.

“Yeah, the security here is pretty tight. As far as they know, I’m still in the Tower, but there are still guys walking around everywhere.”

“They must be on the lookout for surveillance officers. Though their documents were stolen once, I doubt the marquess is ready to let it happen again,” Noah said, before climbing the wall himself. “Let us hide over there for the time being.”

“I’m glad the marquess has this strange statue obsession,” Arcus commented as the group hid themselves behind a collection of statues and hedges.

There were plenty of hiding places in the garden. The problem was the number of mercenaries walking around.

“What shall we do?” Noah asked.

“There are so many guards that we’ll probably get caught right away anyway. Let’s just face them head-on. That or maybe we should create a diversion. Instead of taking them on one by one, I’d feel better if there were less of them to start with.”

“Hey, kid. Y’know stealth’s a thing, right?”

“Yeah, I know, and I’ve got spells for that. I’m just worried that if we sneak past them instead of taking them out, they’ll only cause us trouble later. And then what? We’ve used up all our aether on sneaking through, and we won’t be able to fight.”

“Takin’ them out? There’s only three of us!”

“That’s enough. There are about twenty of them, right? If we combine our spells, we should be able to take them all out at once.”

While they ran the risk of alerting the marquess to their presence this way, he was going to find out soon enough anyway. They also had the option of wiping out the guards before allowing themselves to be captured. At least then the mercenaries wouldn’t be a problem. Arcus already had a plan should that happen. Something that could easily turn the tide in their favor.

“Cazzy, would you happen to have any spells capable of dealing with a great number of opponents at once?” Noah asked.

“Sure I do. What about you?”

“This is not my first time on the battlefield. As long as I can rely on my allies to back me up, I can fight.”

“I’ll be good, too,” Arcus said. “Thanks to you, I’ve still got most of my aether left. I could cast around four *Flamlarune* or ten *Black Ammo*.”

“Black what?” Cazzy said.

“Y’know, the spell I was shooting at the guards’ legs in the Tower.”

“Oh! That spooky spell...”

“Noah, do you know where Lecia is?” Arcus asked.

“According to my investigation before arriving at the Tower, she is highly likely to be in the guest room on the second floor.”

“Got it.” Arcus nodded before standing up. “I’ll go in and cause a fuss. Once the mercenaries gather, I want you two to come at them from the sides.”

Arcus jumped forward into the center of the garden, making sure he was in full view.

“The kid’s got guts,” Cazzy remarked as he and Noah watched from behind. “To think he can just jump out there without a second thought at his age.”

“I quite agree. In fact—”

Noah was interrupted by the clamoring of guards.

“Can we really rely on you, Cazzy?” he asked quickly.

“Sure, ya can trust me. Just think of me as another servant, yeah? He’s gonna pay me, after all, so there’s no way I’m betrayin’ him!”

“Very well. In that case, let us serve our master to the utmost.”

Arcus was already causing enough of a distraction to have mercenaries gathering around him from every angle.

“Hey, Moneybags! Cow Gaston! Moo! Moo! Get back to the farmyard, you old crook! Haha! Moo!”

Noah and Cazzy watched in total silence, both of them not quite sure what to say. It was a rather... immature way to attract attention. Not that it was ineffective, of course.

“Uh... Let’s go,” Cazzy finally said.

“Very well. I shall take the lead.” Noah stood up, reciting the spell he prepared to down the mercenaries.

“Shattered shards of ice in the shriveled garden under the chilling wind. Freeze up from the very depths of glistening hell, and bring these soldiers and chariot wheels to a halt.”

Noah recited his spell with perfect fluency. A cold wind picked up around him, carrying flecks of ice. They would be invisible were it not for the sparkling blue

reflection of the Sol Glasses around them. They spread out over a section of the marquess's garden before falling to the ground. The earth underneath the gathered mercenaries froze, forming a solid sheet of ice.

This was the full effect of Noah's *Freezing Gale*, and it could not have come at a better time. The mercenaries who were charging toward Arcus slipped on the ice beneath their feet and tumbled forward. Meanwhile, Noah sent down a flurry of snow and ice down on them.

"The maiden's tears are cool and pure: blue sapphires which trap the freezing hail. O swordsman, take those tears and scoop out their chilling sadness; raise your sword to protect the maiden."

Artglyphs floated from Noah's palm and formed icicles, which finally froze into a glacial sword. It was as beautiful as crystal, a chilling mist bleeding from its surface.

It was the frozen sword of Jacqueline, better known as the Weeping Maiden.

She was a young noble described in the sixth Ancient Chronicle, *Demons and Society's Collapse*. Noah's spell was taken from a particular passage describing her fall from grace. The purpose of the spell was, of course, to create and maintain the existence of a weapon. Noah took up a fencing stance.

Arcus watched, wondering what was about to happen. Noah sprung forward without warning. Arcus's brain barely registered his first lunge at the nearest mercenary before Noah was bowing gracefully to the remaining members of the stumbling mob.

"I'm afraid I am unable to permit anybody to get in the way of my master."

Despite the polite tone to his words, what happened next was anything but. Noah's sword was not just for stabbing; with each thrust, it sent a sharp shard of ice flying from its tip. The light of the Sol Glasses bounced off those shards, blinding anybody who dared look at them directly. Not only that, but the shard damaged even those surrounding its main target. The attack was imprecise, and relied heavily on the fact that there were so many of them, but even that made it impossible for the mercenaries to retaliate immediately.

Noah thrust his sword forward. It pierced its target, and the shard ripped

through the target's allies. As if that wasn't enough, he sent even more of those shards flying. The surrounding hedges froze over as statues crumbled from the attack. Though they'd weathered many a winter, the unnatural cold the Elder Tongue could call up was more than they could bear.

"Don't get cocky now, slush-for-brains!"

One of the mercenaries had freed himself from his icy restraints and launched himself at Noah. Noah dodged him with an elegant sidestep, slicing at the mercenary's neck as he passed.

The closest group of mercenaries were caught in the resulting spray. Their ankles gripped tightly by the frozen ground, they had no way of dodging.

Noah pulled his sword back, the friction creating a horrible screech.

"Whoa..." Arcus was left speechless.

It was clear now just why Noah was top of his class at the Institute. His sword skills were just as impressive as the spells he conjured.

Noah strolled onward through the icy garden. None of the mercenaries on the back lines wanted to touch him. Even the archers were left powerless, their limbs frozen by Noah's magic.

"Quick! Someone use a fire spell! Attack them and melt the ice on the ground at the same time!" one of the mercenaries commanded.

So there were magicians among them, too. Arcus immediately tracked them down. They'd formed up in a line, beginning to incant their spells.

"So you're both crazy, huh?! You guys are insane! Totally insane, I swear!"

The magicians' spells were interrupted by Cazzy, who was walking across the ice like he was out on an evening stroll. The magicians started over, rephrasing them around his presence.

"He who bears fire cannot bear a heart. Corner and chase the debtor and burn the house down to the ground. That life too shall be your payment."

"Oh, uh..."

"Scale the lawyer and Scale the scholar. May your eloquent speech quench the

flames and become as my shield."

The first spell came from *The Magician's Elegy*. Specifically, a story of an infamous loan shark who sent out pyromancers to collect what was owed him.

Cazzy's spell was made specifically to defend against theirs. The "firebearers" in the story finally found themselves in a courtroom and tried by a lawyer named "Scale," who exposed their sins to the world. Using that lawyer's name here was the best defense against their spell.

It seemed the mercenaries were unaware of the full story, as they continued to chant the exact same spell. They likely thought that if they continued pressing forward, they would eventually break down Cazzy's shield, but their efforts were futile.

As he knew from experience, Cazzy's defensive spells were among the best Arcus had ever seen. Just why somebody as talented as him would resort to kidnapping remained a mystery.

"Ya like the whole 'fire-bearin' thing, don'tcha? Makes things nice and easy for me!" Cazzy cackled, confident enough to goad the guards.

The mercenaries scowled at him, clearly displeased by his scorn. But it would take more than scowls to take him down now.

"Okay!

"O, ruler of chains, may you leave these evildoers gasping for air and freeze them with your glare. Evildoers, be bound! Evildoers, be held! May the twin phantoms tie the chains of Hades to your feet and drag you down into eternal slumber.

"Cerberus's Curse."

By its words, it was clear that the spell was meant to restrict its target. It was the addition of "eternal slumber" that turned it into an offensive spell rather than a neutral binding spell. The phrase was a euphemism for death, after all. The first part of the spell, too, sounded familiar. It was the spell Cazzy tried to use when Sue ramped up the ante in the alleyway.

Artglyphs began to circle Cazzy's feet before turning into ethereal chains. The

chains flew through the air before surrounding the mercenaries like a birdcage and tangling around them, rendering their swords and leather armor powerless.



The chains wrapped around their arms, legs, torsos, and necks. Some hung upside down, some by their throats, and some bent backward. They were criminals, hung and crucified for their misdeeds. Flies caught in a spider's web who could only wait for their hunter's return.

Once all the mercenaries were tied up, Cazzy said just one more word. *"Punish."*

At that moment, the chains tightened around their prey. The mercenaries were powerless and soon were left as nothing but rag dolls held aloft by the chains.

It was an offensive spell, all right. A curse. Arcus couldn't remember seeing any of those words or phrases before, meaning Cazzy must have come up with it himself. It went off without a hitch, too; a spell like that would be a force to be reckoned with on the battlefield.

"Mercenaries ain't so tough, I guess..." Cazzy shrugged.

"What an incredible display," Noah breathed.

"Yeah, so try and leave more for me next time, okay?"

"Wow, Cazzy! You're more amazing than I thought!" Arcus said.

"Oh, so I can impress a ten-year-old too, huh? Big whoop."

Arcus was almost ready to make an indignant comeback when they were faced with reinforcements. This looked like the final group; there was no sign of any more approaching. In all likelihood, the three of them had taken out everyone who was guarding the front, as well as those who were patrolling the inside. The final few were probably only late because they were stationed further away. That or they weren't sure whether they should leave their post or not.

Noah and Cazzy prepared themselves to fight.

"Sorry guys, but there's something I wanna try," Arcus called out to the mercenaries in front of them.

Noah shot his master a puzzled glance. "What are you thinking, Master Arcus?"

“The guest room is on the front-facing side of the mansion, right?”

“Indeed it is.”

“Good.”

“Have ya even got enough aether, kid?” Cazzy asked.

“Don’t worry. What I’m planning shouldn’t take much,” Arcus replied quickly before turning his attention back to the area around them.

Arcus checked the estate’s windows, but there was no sign of the marquess, nor of the mercenaries’ leader. Neither of them would witness Arcus using his magic right now, so there was no need for him to hold back.

This was for his sister, who cried for him that day.

His sister, who worked so hard to meet her parents’ expectations.

Arcus had no mercy for those who would harm that sister of his.

“Archers, nock your arrows!”

As the mercenaries prepared their bows, Noah and Cazzy put themselves on guard once more. The corner of Arcus’s lip curled sadistically. Everything was right where it needed to be. Without hesitation, he recited his spell.

“Miller of the river, miller of wheat. You lack skill, you lack talent. You are lazy, you cannot manage. Your flour rides on the air, useless as dust.”

There was a clamor of confused voices.

“What was that spell?”

“It can’t have been offensive!”

“The kid’s just bluffing! Focus on the other two next to him!”

The outcome of his spell still not clear, the mercenaries decided that Arcus was not worth worrying about. They instead focused their attacks on Noah and Cazzy. Arcus and the effects of his spell were now invisible to them.

Exposure Dust.

The artglyphs from Arcus’s incantation flew up to surround the mercenaries. There was a crackling sound as they exploded, covering the area in a fine, white

dust. The dust clung to their bodies like flour from a sack. The mercenaries began to splutter.

“A-A smokescreen?! That’s low!”

“Quick! Magicians, use wind magic! Get rid of this stuff!”

The archers were in no position to shoot their arrows now. Meanwhile, the wind spells achieved nothing but whipping up the white dust around them, sending it scattering even further than before. It seemed the mercenaries had no idea they were just tightening the nooses around their own necks.

“Master Arcus. A smokescreen is indeed an excellent tool... when used at the right time.”

“That dust ain’t gonna kill ’em, y’know!” Cazzy added.

“What? You guys think I’m done?”

They were right. Alone, his spell was useless.

All he did was cover the enemy in combustible powder.

The wind magic helped to spread the powder. Though they weren’t in a sealed space, it was still enough for Arcus to carry on with his plan. From his breast pocket, he pulled out a small piece of steel engraved with seals. He then threw it toward the dust-covered mercenaries.

“Get down, you two! And cover your ears!” he warned his companions.

They flung themselves down on the lawn, despite not understanding the situation. The moment the steel hit the ground, it began to spark, igniting the white powder around it. The dust in the air caught alight, the flames spreading rapidly across each particle. Finally, when the energy was too much for the space to bear, an incredible reaction between gas and flame triggered.

The ground rumbled beneath them while the air exploded into flame above them. The thunderous boom was so loud that it drowned out the screams of the mercenaries engulfed in it.

Arcus waited until it was safe to get up. When he did, all he could see in front of him was utter carnage. The once-vibrant green lawn was scorched to a blackened crisp. The glass from every window that looked out onto the garden

had been shattered into a million pieces. The mercenaries caught up in the blast were in a horrifying state. Some were torn apart by the explosion. Some suffocated from the flames. Some were left limbless. Though others were still gasping for air, their injuries were so heavy that they wouldn't be able to move any time soon.

Most of them were dead. Though a few survivors likely remained out of sight, dealing with them would only be a matter of time.

Noah swept his gaze over the garden, his mouth agape. "Wh-What on earth was that, Master Arcus?"

"I just set the dust alight, and it exploded."

"The dust... exploded?"

It seemed Noah didn't understand, meaning the physics behind what Arcus just did weren't known in this world. At the very least, it wasn't easily accessible information here, due to the lack of television or internet.

Cazzy's expression was stiff as he eyed Arcus. "How the hell d'ya know about this? Ain't ya s'posed to be just some noble kid?"

So Cazzy knew?

"I have my ways."

Cazzy snorted. "I bet ya do."

"Have you seen this sort of thing before, Cazzy?" Noah asked.

"It's somethin' that happens at flour mills, though it's rare. The flour flies into the air and gets set alight, and then the whole place goes flyin'!"

"It's a dust explosion," Arcus explained. "Combustible flour, sawdust, or aluminum powder gets in the air and mixes with the gas. If it catches fire, it creates a powerful reaction like the one we just saw."

"What? Ya even know *how* it works?"

"It's good at catching your opponent off-guard. Plus, it hardly uses any magic at all! The only problem is, you're relying on a totally natural process, so if something doesn't line up properly, you're toast."

“Ya givin’ me the creeps, kid.” Cazzy shuddered. “Ya were just like this with the whole flyin’ shtick, too.”

“I worry for your future sometimes,” Noah added. “In fact, make that ‘all the time.’”

“Whatever.” Arcus was starting to get used to them talking about him like this.

“Master Arcus. Please go on ahead. We shall take care of things here.”

“Got it.”

“Wait up, pretty boy. Ya sure it’s okay to let him go alone?”

“You continue to doubt him, even after what you just witnessed?”

“Uh... Good point.” Cazzy grinned sheepishly before preparing himself to take on the remaining guard.

“I’ll see you guys later, then,” Arcus said, helping himself to a dead mercenary’s sword.

It was fairly short, usable even by a child like him—most likely a back-up weapon. Arcus turned, heading for the back entrance. Whatever happened, he was determined to save Lecia.

It didn’t take long after Arcus began his attack for Charlotte Cremelia to notice the ruckus that was going on outside the guest room window.

“What on earth is going on out there?”

It had been a few hours since the marquess promised their deaths. Both she and Lecia had been waiting anxiously this whole time, wondering when he would come back. She could only imagine that the reason he hadn’t killed them yet was because he was keeping a close eye on the Raytheft and Cremelia houses. If they already knew the marquess had them here and they died, it would be near impossible for him to escape suspicion. He could have all the money and the highest government position in the world, but if a military family dared to bare their fangs at him, he was done for.

It was highly likely that he wanted to make sure they had no idea of their

daughters' whereabouts before he acted. For the time being, Charlotte and Lecia were safe. At best, they probably had until the following night.

It was then that the estate suddenly went into an uproar. At first, there were shouts and thundering footfall in the corridors. Once things were quiet again for a while, there were more noises outside. These noises were different. There were screams and the sounds of large objects breaking. Finally, there was a huge rumbling boom, loud enough to set Charlotte's ears ringing.

Charlotte wouldn't expect to hear such violent sounds here, given the mansion's position in the capital. Guards patrolled the area around these noble estates frequently, and every mansion had a private guard on top of that. Causing trouble in a place like this was a fool's errand.

She would have loved to discuss what might be happening with someone, but Lecia, the only other person in the room, was gagged. It also sounded like whatever was happening was happening on the other side of the estate, so looking out of the window would offer no clues, either. It was frustrating, to say the least.

Just then, the guest room door opened, revealing the ape-like mercenary leader behind it.

He strolled into the room. "Ladies, it looks like we're under attack."

"What?" Charlotte exchanged a glance with Lecia.

This estate was heavily guarded, particularly the outside. Who would be foolish enough to launch an attack under such conditions? Could it have been launched by one of the girls' fathers?

"From what I heard, this little lady's kid brother's brought some friends with him. He's pretty brave for a lad with no talent!"

"Arcus is here?"

Didn't the marquess say he sent Arcus to the Holy Tower? If he was here, then how on earth did he manage to escape? Not only that, but why did he come here, instead of heading straight home?

The door opened again, interrupting Charlotte's train of thought. This time, it

was the estate's master, Cau Gaston, who appeared. He was wrapped in a bathrobe, the steam from his soak still coming off his large body. Gaston turned to the mercenary.

"Give me an update. What is going on?"

"Everything's going swimmingly, Milord! My men have it all under control!"

"I heard we have an intruder on our hands. Who are they? Are we dealing with the Surveillance Office? The Cremelias? The Raythefts? Who?"

"Uh, it's that kid, Milord. The one Your Lordship sent to the Tower!"

"Nonsense! The Raytheft boy?"

"That's what my men are saying, and they wouldn't dare lie to me!"

Gaston grumbled. "Somebody must have slipped up and let him get away! But I was sure to give my note to one of my own men... It doesn't make sense!"

Charlotte couldn't believe it herself. From what she heard, escape from the Tower was utterly impossible.

"Still, this does leave us in a bit of a tight spot," Gaston continued.

"No need to worry, Milord! We'll sort that kid out!"

"That's not my concern. If he escaped from the Tower, there's a good chance his father's heard about what's going on now."

It was a reasonable assumption and, if Arcus *had* told his father, there was a good chance Joshua would have passed the news onto Purce, too.

The mercenary didn't seem concerned. "Nah, he wouldn't know."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because the kid only brought two more men with him, Milord."

"What?"

"I'm sure of it, Milord. If he told his dad, we should have way more intruders on our hands."

"Yes... Joshua would have brought as many men as he could!"

There would be no expense spared in the rescue of his daughter. At the very

least, the viscount would have sent more than just three people, especially considering one of them was his ten-year-old son. It was also unlikely that Arcus told his father before coming straight back here. If his father knew, then surely Arcus would have waited for him to gather some men together. But he hadn't, and there was a simple explanation for it.

"He's worried I'm going to kill his sister straight away," Gaston said.

"Yeah, I think so too, Milord."

Just then, there was the sound of hurried footsteps in the corridor. They got louder and louder, until suddenly a servant flung open the door without even bothering to knock.

"My Lord!" he gasped. "My Lord!"

"What is it?"

"A-A thief... I mean, a child has broken into the estate!"

"You mean the Raytheft boy? Is he alone?"

"Yes, My Lord!"

"In that case, capture him as soon as possible! He's a child, not a rabid criminal!"

"We are trying our best, My Lord, but... it's proving difficult!"

"'Difficult'?" Gaston roared. "'Difficult' to put a stop to a *small boy*?!"

The servant shrunk back in fear.

The head mercenary lowered his voice, addressing the servant. "What about the other two outside? How are my men doing?"

"S-Sir, it seems that your men have been... Well, they've been wiped out..."

"Wiped out?! You must be joking!"

"I am not, sir! I saw it myself, outside the window! All of them were... dead." The servant's voice cracked on the last syllable, and he was getting paler and paler by the minute.

The news made even the marquess and the mercenary exchange a fearful

glance. The mercenary knew just how many men he had at Gaston's estate *and* how well spread-out they were.

"B-But there are only three attackers in total! And one of them's a minor!" the mercenary protested.

"It seems the guard has been completely wiped out by magic. The back garden looks completely frozen, but also like it's been burnt to cinders at the same time..."

"So they know their magic tricks, huh?" the mercenary spat in frustration.

Gaston slammed his fist down on the table in front of him. "I knew there was something funny about that child!"

"It must be the two he has with him, Milord! Even a low-level martial family like the Raythefts has gotta have some decent magicians. Still, it's weird they let the kid go ahead by himself like that..."

Gaston pinched the bridge of his nose between two fingers. "How many times must I tell you not to underestimate him? I am certain he is only pretending to be weak, like a wolf in sheep's clothing!"

"A wolf, Milord? I guess it's time to go hunting, then."

There were more footsteps and shouts from the corridor. There was the clanging of metal, as though there was a swordfight going on, but it wasn't long until the sounds died down again. The guest room door flung open once again.

Their fourth visitor that evening was much smaller than the previous three. With silver hair and crimson eyes, he looked just like Lecia, but in male clothing. There was no doubt in Charlotte's mind that this was Arcus Raytheft.

Dressed in typical noble fashion, he held a sword in his right hand. His ruby eyes scanned the room until they found his sister.

"Lecia! Are you hurt?!"

Lecia shook her head vigorously. The relieved smile on Arcus's face lasted only a second before he turned to glare at the marquess. There was a harsh fierceness to his eyes, unlike any Charlotte had ever seen from boys her own age.

“How on earth did you get out of the Tower, boy?” Gaston growled.

“No way would I tell you!” Arcus pointed his blade at Gaston. “I’m taking my sister back!”

“How dare you speak to me like that?!”

The mercenary stepped in front of Gaston, sensing a fight brewing. “Don’t think you’re tough just ‘cause you talked some grown-ups into coming here with you! They’re not here to help you out now, are they?”

“I can fight for myself.”

“Guess it’ll take killing you for you to learn that you can’t!” The mercenary unsheathed the sword on his back.

“Restrain him!” cried Gaston.

“No need, Milord. He can’t fight back anyhow.”

Arcus moved the sword away from Gaston’s neck and gripped it with both hands. The stance he took wasn’t the usual one he would use for fencing. He used a rarer position because of the shorter length of his sword.

The mercenary let out an impressed hum, not expecting Arcus to know of this stance.

“So you *do* know how to fight. You were just pretending before, huh?”

“Of course. If my uncle ever saw how I tried to fight back then, he’d bite my head off.”

“Is that right? Well then, I won’t hold back either!”

The next moment, the mercenary thrust his sword straight at Arcus, having closed the gap between them in an instant. It took him by surprise, but he still had the wherewithal to fend off the attack with his own sword.

“I’m not done yet!” the mercenary laughed.

His large stature made his slashes all the wider and more powerful. It would be difficult enough for an adult to defend themselves against such overwhelming force, let alone a child. Yet Arcus did just that, blocking each strike from above with the side of his sword.

“Whoa...” Charlotte couldn’t help but breathe a sigh of astonishment as she watched.

Apparently tired of staying in one place, Arcus started to circle the room. Not worried about damaging the furniture, he scrambled over it and used it as cover from his opponent’s blows. He jumped around and kept a perfect balance, avoiding each of the mercenary’s strikes as he did so. He never once showed signs of wobbling, even when he was forced to crouch or stand on one leg. Charlotte could only think that his training regime must have been incredibly thorough.

The mercenary wasn’t able to move as freely as before, now that Arcus had led him to the more furnished side of the room. It wasn’t enough to compensate for their difference in size, though. Longer arms meant longer reach, and higher strength meant stronger strikes. No matter how well Arcus was able to dodge, the mercenary’s sheer size never once allowed him an opening. His frustration was starting to show on his face.

“Come on! Get it together, kid!” the mercenary taunted.

“D-Dammit!”

“You can’t win by running away, y’know!”

Noticing Arcus’s irritation, the mercenary kicked at him. Though Arcus was able to block his sword just in time, he lost his balance and was sent rolling over the floor. He was back on his feet in an instant, wielding his own sword once more. Meanwhile, the mercenary showed no signs of slowing his onslaught.

“You sure have a lot of confidence for a kid! But I can still send you flying just like that!”

Arcus scowled at him.

“Look, little kids like you should just go curl up in the corner while the real men like us fight! You’re nothing but a talentless hack!”

Again, Arcus was hit. And again, he got back to his feet instantly.

As Charlotte watched, a doubt began to form in her mind.

How can he keep standing up against such a powerful opponent?

How could he keep picking up his sword, again and again?

When she and Lecia were captured, Charlotte gave up the moment she realized her opponents outclassed her. It was because her gift allowed her to see her own defeat, making her believe that was the only outcome. As long as her opponents were bigger, stronger, and more skilled than her, there was no way to win.

Yet here was Arcus, standing up again and again despite facing such an opponent. He must have been in pain. But still, he stood up.

Arcus's parries were getting slower and slower. The mercenary swung down his sword again, and though Arcus blocked it just in time, his body was sent flying and eventually slammed against the wall.

He was gasping for breath now. His body was so bruised that it pained Charlotte even to look. She couldn't hold back anymore.

"Stop!"

Please, just give up! No one will blame you!

Arcus looked her way with a puzzled expression.

"You should know you cannot defeat him! So just give up!"

"Uh, thanks for the concern, but there's no way I can quit now." Arcus smiled at her.

Why on earth was he being so stubborn? He didn't even deny that his opponent was too strong for him. Charlotte couldn't understand.

"I'm not giving up. I don't care what they call me. Talentless, useless... Whatever. I gotta keep fighting!"

It was just then that Charlotte remembered her father's words.

"Even if you can see your opponent's moves, that does not make them a certainty. Even if you can see your own defeat, that is not a reason to give in. Things can still change."

"Remember this."

The mercenary burst into laughter.

“You gotta be joking! I’ve never met a kid as stuck-up as you! Come on, just accept it! There’s no way you can win! Even the little lady thinks so!”

“I can’t give up,” Arcus repeated. “Not yet.”

“I guess you’re looking at an early grave, then.” Sword in hand, the mercenary took a step closer to Arcus.

“Do make him put up a good fight, won’t you?” Gaston said, his lip curling viciously.

“You got it, Milord.”

Just then, Charlotte saw something—a flicker, an intimation—which made her gasp. Something that made her stop yelling at Arcus to give up.

“Fighting you head on was never gonna work. I knew that from the start.”

“Well then, why don’t you—”

“That’s why I’ve been waiting just for this moment to play my last card.” Arcus pointed a finger at the mercenary.

When Charlotte looked closer, however, she saw that it wasn’t just one finger. He had his thumb raised, too.

“Huh? What are you doing?”

“This is something that’s gonna mess you up. Big time.”

“Huh?”

“Thanks for knocking me all the way to this end of the room.” Arcus smirked before starting to mutter something under his breath.

“Do whatever you want! I already know you only have enough aether to fill a thimble!”

“Shut up! I’m gonna blow your brains out!”

Bang!

The mercenary had no time to defend against Arcus’s spell. Even though Charlotte saw just moments before what Arcus was about to do, she still couldn’t wrap her head around what happened.

Putting his index finger to his lips, Arcus blew away the wisp of smoke that rose from it.

“I’m glad this spell came in handy. I’ll have to thank Sue later.”

Arcus rose to his feet. The mercenary lay on the floor, unmoving.

Arcus looked down at the head mercenary on the floor in front of him. He reminded him of the gorillas he saw in the man’s world. He lay there lifeless, the blood draining from his head. He can’t have seen this coming. Arcus was at a complete disadvantage, and the mercenary had the upper hand throughout the entire fight.

If Arcus tried to cast a spell earlier, his opponent might have taken that opportunity to close the distance between them. He didn’t want to reveal his true magic ability to any of the servants in the corridor, and until he knew who was here in the guest room, he couldn’t judge whether it was worth using his trump card or not. It was only because of his restraint up to this point and the false image he’d put up that he could catch such a physically superior opponent off-guard.

In other words, there was no guarantee he would be able to use it at all. If the distance between him and the mercenary never widened, then he would have to create that distance, and the opportunity to strike, himself. He knew it was just a matter of time before the mercenary let his guard down when he realized how “weak” Arcus was. If Arcus cast his spell too early, he would lose the element of surprise and his chance of winning.

It was only when Arcus hit the wall that the opportunity to use his *Black Ammo* came. By the time the mercenary heard the incantation and put together that he’d been hoodwinked, it was already too late.

Arcus’s aim was perfect, and he was too far away now for the mercenary to attack straight away. If only he bothered to check on his men in the garden, he may have realized what he was dealing with sooner. If only he listened to Gaston’s warnings.

When Arcus said he was going to “blow his brains out,” he meant it. The floor was strewn with pulverized gray matter.

He probably thought that the strongest spells were the most visually impressive, too.

The thought crossed Arcus's mind as he looked down at the corpse. It was a common assumption. The strongest spells often had a large area of impact and longer incantations; Arcus's *Black Ammo* was an exception.

Arcus turned to look at his sister. Next to her sat the girl who cried out to stop him. Both of them stared at him in shock. It must have been the first time they'd seen magic used this way.

The marquess's own look of shock quickly twisted into a scowl. "Was that magic?"

"My family's known for its magical ability. What do you think?"

"Well then, why did you act like such a simpleton before?"

"To make him underestimate me. I should've fought back sooner, but it's pretty tough when you're just a kid, y'know."

Really, it was Arcus who misjudged the situation at first. He thought that his magical abilities would get him out of anything, and that misconception led him to the Tower.

"What if he restrained you like I ordered him to? Then you would be in a fix!"

"No, that would've made things easier. First he'd need to go through the whole process of disarming me. It would have left me plenty of time to plug him."

"We would have killed the girls the moment you tried anything funny."

"No you wouldn't. Hostages are useless once they're dead, and your mercenary would be wasting time trying to kill them without paying attention to me. At that moment, you'd both be dead. Guess it doesn't matter now anyway."

For once, Gaston looked surprised, as though he only just grasped Arcus's reasoning. This might have been the first time taking hostages hadn't turned the tide in his favor, assuming he'd taken them before.

"Anyway, it's over. So stand down."

“You really think it’s over?” Gaston smiled. “You don’t know who you’re dealing with, do you?”

“Look, there’s no point taking *me* as a hostage. I can speak faster than you can move. Plus...”

Thanks to his daily training, Arcus was faster than him, too. Leaping forward so that Lecia and the other girl were behind him, Arcus faced the marquess with his arms outstretched. Gaston fell into a fighting stance, ready to attack—not that he was in a position to, coming fresh out of the bath. Arcus had a clear advantage, both physical and magical. He only had enough aether left to cast *Black Ammo* one more time, but that was all he needed.

Just then, Noah and Cazzy burst through the door. They must have finished dealing with the rest of the guards in the garden.

“O-Oh. Guess ya don’t need us after all!”

“If only we had come here sooner.”

“You have back-up?”

If he didn’t realize it before, Gaston must have known he was in trouble now. He ground his teeth for a while before eventually letting out a sigh.

He raised both his hands in surrender. “Alright. I admit defeat.”

Arcus narrowed his eyes. For someone at gunpoint and soaking in his own failure, he seemed unnaturally calm. There was nothing noble about his surrender, either; Arcus got the impression he didn’t actually *feel* defeated. Did he think they would just leave him be now?

“How about a deal, Arcus Raytheft?”

“A deal? You think you’re in a position to say that kinda thing?”

“Yes. I am willing to end things here. I will ignore the fact that you stormed my estate and killed so many of my men; I will even return the girls to you. But in return, you must give me the evidence.”

“Why should I take that deal? I can just take them back myself, and I’ve got nothing more to gain anyway.”

“Oh, I think you do.”

“Like what?”

“I can offer you my assistance. A boy in your position must have fiduciary concerns. I think that’s rather reasonable, don’t you?”

Arcus’s parents gave him no financial support at all. It was very likely that money was going to be an issue in his future. Gaston probably guessed this and saw it as a way to sweeten the deal. The only people who knew about what happened tonight were right here in this room. As long as everyone kept quiet, the marquess would never pay for kidnapping Lecia and the other girl.

“Don’t be stupid. I’m not gonna agree to that.”

“And here I thought you were smart. I must have been mistaken.”

“You *are* mistaken, especially if you think money’s the answer to every problem.”

“That’s how the adult world works, in case you were not aware.”

“Don’t think you can look down on me just ‘cause I’m a kid. I’m not as obsessed with growing up as you might think.”

“That doesn’t matter. Children like you are easy to lead around by their base impulses.”

“So? If that’s the worst of it, then I don’t mind being a kid. Helpless, impulsive Arcus Raytheft. That’s me.”

Gaston snorted. “I see what you’re thinking. Nobility should take pride in being upstanding rulers of society, is that it? It matters not when it comes to money. Money doesn’t care about what you do to get it. When you have it, that’s that.”

“Maybe so, but the way I see it, your money is tainted.”

“Tainted?”

“That’s right. And I don’t want anything to do with it.”

Just then, Cazzy interjected. “Listen, Arcus. He’s kinda right. Doesn’t matter how ya get your money, it’s still got the same value, and ya can still use it for all

the same things. Don't ya think so?"

Arcus looked up at him, puzzled. What was he trying to say?

"What's gotten into you?"

"Just felt like sayin' it, is all."

Was that really it? As Arcus recalled, Cazzy cared a lot about money. In any case, he had a point. There wasn't any practical need for its owner to worry where it came from.

"I get it, but once you use tainted money, your heart is tainted too," said Arcus.

"Huh? Whaddya mean?"

"The moment you use dirty money is the moment you stop worrying what you do with it. You stop caring about those who earn their money fairly, as you earn yours dishonestly, which just puts them at a disadvantage. The more you use that dirty money, the more honest people suffer, right?"

It was a never-ending cycle. Using your ill-gotten gains and getting away with it would just reinforce the idea that it was okay, whether you stole it or committed fraud. You'd realize that it was easy—that with virtually no effort, you could wring a fortune from the world. The more you cheated, the easier it became, and eventually your guilty conscience would be worn away. The people who lost out from your misdeeds would be of no concern to you anymore.

That was what that man's mother said as they watched a news report on a new scam going around where fraudsters would phone up elderly people and squeeze them for cash by posing as their children. Having scammed their victims, the fraudsters stopped caring how it affected them. They never paid those elderly people a second thought, too obsessed with their newfound money.

If their hearts weren't "tainted," Arcus didn't know what they were.

He studied Cazzy carefully.

"Those're some pretty big ideas for a little kid."

“You think I’m wrong?”

“Nah. What ya said made sense.”

Arcus waited, but Cazzy made no further comment. Arcus still couldn’t work out why he felt the need to say anything in the first place.

When Gaston next spoke, he addressed Cazzy. “You there.”

“Huh? What?”

“You’re a magician too, are you not? I’ll pay you enough money to live the rest of your life in luxury if you get rid of these two for me. What do you think?”

He must have realized from Cazzy’s words that he saw money as morally neutral. Cazzy was only here because Arcus paid him, and he didn’t see what would logically stop him from accepting Gaston’s offer. In his gut, though, he just knew Cazzy would refuse.

Cazzy sighed before walking up to the marquess. “Say, Mr. Marquess, d’ya maybe remember hangin’ a certain farming family ten odd years ago? It was in your territory, after all.”

“A single peasant family? How should I remember something like that?”

“Ya took their youngest daughter in when they couldn’t pay your interest.”

“Now that you mention it, I do recall something similar. I did hear that family had a funny way of looking at money. That there was good money and bad money, or something along those lines.”

“What happened to their little girl?”

“That family defied me. I did what I wanted with her for a while before making up some sentence to have her hanged.”

Cazzy took in his words. “Izzat right?”

The next moment, Cazzy closed the distance between them, and his fist made a comfortable place for itself in his face. Even as large as he was, Gaston went flying. Cazzy shook his hand out.

Gaston glared at him. “H-How dare you!”

“I ain’t takin’ that deal. I was never gonna, anyway.” Cazzy opened his mouth

to recite an incantation.

“W-Wait, Cazzy!” Arcus cried.

“Don’t try and stop me! Ya don’t know what this bastard did!”

“I don’t, but you can’t kill him!”

“Why not?!”

“Look, just calm down and listen to me!”

Maybe it was because of the grudge Cazzy seemed to hold against Gaston that he offered to join the attack on the mansion so readily. Arcus hated the marquess too, but it wouldn’t be a good idea to exact revenge now. It seemed that both their younger sisters suffered under Gaston. Even Arcus wanted some way to take out his anger.

“Master Arcus?”

“Don’t kill him. But you can beat him up if you want.”

“Huh?”

“We’re the only ones here. Just make sure it looks like self-defense.” Arcus’s lip curled cruelly.

Cazzy gaped at him for only a second before his own grin spread across his face.

Gaston began to protest desperately. “Do you really think you can get away with that?!”

“You’ll hang anyway, right? There’s all this evidence of corruption against you, and you kidnapped a noble’s daughter to try and cover it up. If it looks like you’re gonna get away with your crimes, the Raytheft house and its allies will cause a stink, and the King will be forced to punish you to avoid infighting,” Arcus explained casually.

Gaston wouldn’t be able to use his position or connections to escape Joshua’s wrath against his daughter’s would-be murderer. Joshua had his own connections among various military nobles and would surely use them to start an attack against the marquess. With no fighting experience, Gaston wouldn’t

even last a second, and his reputation meant no one would want to ally themselves with him, either. In fact, anyone eyeing his position for themselves would be more likely to ignore the entire conflict.

The marquess's fate was sealed the moment his offer was rejected.

"Noah. If anyone asks, we didn't see anything, okay?"

"How soft you are, Master Arcus. Very well. I shall take no notice of anything that happens."

"I'm surprised you didn't even say anything to stop me earlier," said Arcus.

"Oh?" Noah smiled knowingly.

"You two are fine with this too, right?" Arcus asked his sister and the girl next to her.

They nodded.

"It's payback time." Cazzy let out his usual, squeaky laugh and began to approach Gaston.

Gaston tried to run away, as anyone would.

"Dammit!"

"What? Thought ya could get away?" Cazzy caught up easily and launched another punch.

He was stronger than he looked. Gaston, despite his build, didn't seem to know how to defend himself. He was sent sprawling to the floor. Walking up to him, Cazzy cracked his knuckles. Gaston shrieked like a strangled chicken.

"I'll have to return this favor at some point..." Cazzy muttered quietly.

"Did you say something?" Arcus asked.

"Nah. Nothin'."

With that, Cazzy got to work administering the marquess's punishment.

While Cazzy was doing that, Arcus untied the girls. The moment Lecia was freed, she leapt at Arcus.

“Brother!”

“Lecia! I’m so glad you’re okay!”

His beloved sister finally in his arms again, Arcus was filled to the brim with relief. Holding her close, he could feel her trembling. Her face had been bone dry, but she must have been holding back tears the whole time. She sobbed into his chest. There was no need to put on a brave face anymore. Arcus stroked her head gently.

“I’m sorry.” Lecia sobbed. “This is all because I took that bag.”

“It’s not your fault. It’s the fault of all the adults who do this kinda bad stuff.”

“But I—”

“It’s not your fault,” Arcus whispered, continuing to hold and comfort her until she calmed down.

Arcus blamed Gaston, of course, but he also blamed the officer who got Lecia involved. Technically, she could have handled things better, but she was just a child, after all. The officer should have known this sort of thing might happen.

Arcus was curious about the girl with her. That girl was watching them with a gentle gaze, likely suspecting it would be insensitive to interrupt. Soon, Lecia’s sobs quieted.

“Feel better?”

“Yes.”

Though Lecia still seemed emotional, she wiped away the last of her tears on her sleeve and looked up at Arcus determinedly. As the heiress to the Raytheft name, she would have been taught that she couldn’t cry forever. The next second, doubt flashed in her eyes.

“Brother... Do you think I was wrong in doing what I did?” she asked fearfully.

“You mean taking the evidence?”

“Yes. I believed that helping those who seek justice is the right thing to do as a noble. Yet my actions led to all of this. Now I am doubting whether I was even in the right to begin with.” Lecia’s eyes pleaded Arcus for an answer.

Maybe she thought she would have been better off refusing the official.

“Just because things didn’t work out doesn’t mean your actions were wrong, and just because something’s the right thing to do doesn’t mean it’s sure to succeed.”

“But doesn’t that mean—”

“You’re too worried about results. You didn’t think any of this would happen, right? No one can see the future. I don’t think it’s very noble to let fear hold you back from doing the right thing, just ‘cause it might go wrong, do you?”

It might not have been very fair for Arcus to throw in the word “noble” when he knew that was what Lecia cared most about. He just wanted her to know that letting fear hold her back in anything would only lead to misery.

He thought back to a particular experience in that man’s life.

That man had a friend, and that friend was a horribly anxious person. He was a clever man, and yet the fear of failure held him back. He refused opportunities left and right and eventually gave up one of the greatest opportunities of all. Despite his potential, he threw it all away, and by the end of his life, had very little to show for his smarts.

He was left full of regret.

“If only I had said yes,” he said again and again, as he and the man spoke over drinks. “If only I had gone for it.”

That friend taught Arcus a valuable lesson. Holding yourself back like that and limiting your potential would only lead to regret. He didn’t want the same thing to happen to Lecia. If that was how she ended up as head of the Raytheft house, the masses would see her as feeble.

“Don’t worry about failure, Lecia. Just listen to your heart.”

“But what if something like this were to happen again?”

“I’ll be around to save you then, too. I’m your brother, yeah?”

“Okay...” Though her eyes were starting to fill with tears again, Lecia didn’t let them overflow and nodded firmly. “I shan’t stray from my values.”

“Good girl.”

Arcus turned his attention to the other girl. She had long, golden-brown hair and shiny, amber eyes. Good-looking and refined rather than cute, she was the perfect picture of an upper-class girl. Her eyes were somehow mature yet doll-like at the same time, hidden beneath a set of long eyelashes. Two cheek-length locks framed her face. From her white outfit came the soft scent of springtime flowers, and there was not a crease or wrinkle to be seen. It was only now that Arcus properly acknowledged her and realized how mature she seemed. He could tell that her education must have been very strict indeed, and in all likelihood, she came from a higher-ranking family than he and Lecia did.

“Who’s this, Lecia?” asked Arcus.

“This is Charlotte, of the Cremelia house.”

The count’s daughter?

The daughter of the family that the Raythefts answered to. Arcus heard that Lecia and Charlotte got on well and would often go out together. She was unlucky to get caught up in all of this. Or perhaps it was calculated, and Gaston thought having Charlotte here as well would put more pressure on Lecia to give in to him.

It was only then that Arcus remembered his manners. Letting go of Lecia, he took to one knee and bowed.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Lady Charlotte. My name is Arcus Raytheft. We can only apologize for getting you involved in all of this.”

“Oh, please do not apologize! It was all thanks to your bravery that we were saved. Thank you ever so much for coming to rescue us.”

“It is an honor, My Lady.”

Charlotte tucked her hair behind her ear and looked at him, her eyes soft with admiration. “If I may be so forward...”

“Y-Yes?”

“I am one of those who thought you to be talentless. As somebody who believes herself to be somewhat gifted, whenever I heard those rumors, I

thought badly of you.”

Arcus wondered if these rumors she spoke of were passed on to her by her parents.

“I was surely mistaken. When I realized that mercenary was far too strong for me, I was very quick to give up. You, however, stood against him until the very end.”

“Oh, that was nothing...” Arcus mumbled.

Even Arcus had to admit he was outmatched when it came to sword fighting alone. If Noah was there to help, he might have had a chance at victory, but on his own, it was impossible. It was only because of his surprise attack that he won.

“My family oversees the kingdom’s fencing style. One day, I am sure many will look to me as a representative of the art. For far too long I focused only on the virtues of ‘talent’ without paying heed to anything else. As a result, I ended up unable to protect your sister or myself.”

“My Lady—”

“It matters not how strong the opponent. You have shown me that honor only comes from fighting until the bitter end.” Charlotte put her hand to her heart. “I shan’t forget that moment in a hurry. The moment you said you would not give up. I apologize for trying to convince you otherwise.”

She was very honest to be speaking her mind unprompted. After her apology, she stepped forward and took Arcus by the hand.

“May I address you just as ‘Arcus’?”

“Huh? Oh, of course, My Lady.”

“Thank you, Arcus. I am very much looking forward to being your fiancée once again.”

“What?!”

“Ch-Charlotte?!” Lecia cried, astonished.

“F-Fiancée?” Arcus echoed, wondering if he heard her correctly.

“Were you not aware? Our fathers arranged our engagement the moment you were born. However, the viscount asked to cancel the arrangement somewhat recently.”

“I-I think I remember something like that...”

The agreement hadn’t been spoken of since the day Arcus’s aether was tested, of course. After that, he quickly assumed it was already canceled and forgot about it.

“I agreed to call it off then,” Charlotte said, looking away from him bashfully. “However, I would like to reconsider, if I may.”

“I-I see...” Arcus didn’t know what else he could say.

People were arranging and rearranging his plans for marriage left and right, which never gave him the chance to think about it for himself. Cazzy whaling on the marquess in the corner didn’t make the space conducive to introspection, either.

Eventually, the marquess’s punishment came to an end. Gaston was tied up, and after a while, there was a sudden commotion from outside, announcing the arrival of the aid Noah called for.

After receiving a request for help, it seemed from the noise that Craib put together some men and rushed to the scene as soon as he could. In other words, it had taken him this long to come to Arcus’s rescue without alerting Gaston to his actions.

There, in the marquess’s gaudy garden, stood not only the Raythefts’ troops but Craib’s and the Cremelias’ too, as well as some troops from other allied houses. The head of the Raytheft house, Joshua Raytheft, was also waiting as the group left the estate. Next to him was his wife, Celine. They watched Arcus with a cool glare, surrounded by troops from their branch families and houses below them. Joshua spotted Lecia as she and Arcus approached.

“Lecia! You are unharmed!”

“Father!”

A flash of relief appeared on Joshua’s face shortly before he turned to glare at

Arcus. “You really messed up this time, boy!”

His face was red, and his eyes and words were burning with a fiery rage.

“You shouldn’t be blaming me. There’s an unconscious marquess over there who I think you’d wanna talk to,” Arcus replied in a cool voice, pointing back at Gaston, who had been dragged out of the mansion by Cazzy.

The marquess’s breathing was labored, and his entire body was swollen from Cazzy’s assault. Joshua picked up on Gaston’s critical state immediately.

“Wh-What on earth have you done to His Lordship?!”

“You’re worried about *him*? You know what he did, right?”

Joshua was here because Craib told him what happened, and Arcus expected him to ask for more details before anything else. Yet here he was, more worried about the fate of his fellow noble. While understanding it was partly due to his position as head of a noble household, Arcus still found it abhorrent.

“You must have done something to him!” Joshua snarled.

“*I’m* not the villain here!”

“Then why is His Lordship in such a state?! If you hadn’t gotten involved—”

“Ugh. Your head’s full of nonsense as usual! I’m done listening to you.”

“Why, you!”

Just then, Arcus felt the full force of Joshua’s anger. It was an overwhelming, burning pressure that stemmed from his rage, and it felt like he was being pressed down from above by an invisible force.

It was a power that came from his abundant aether. If Arcus wasn’t careful, that power had the strength to knock him unconscious. He couldn’t let that happen. This was the power he was going to crush one day. He was already on the path that led to this man’s defeat. If he let himself be overwhelmed now, he might never find the strength to recover.

His age and lack of aether had nothing to do with it. Relying on those excuses now meant accepting defeat. Joshua would always be older than him, and Joshua would always have a superior level of aether.

Arcus planted his legs firmly on the ground and kept the fire in his heart burning. He stared his former father right in the face, knowing that this was an opponent a hundred times stronger than the marquess or his mercenary.

Joshua couldn't stand it. Arcus could already sense that his fist was about to fly loose.

"That's enough, Joshua."

"C-Count Cremelia..."

The older gentleman standing next to Charlotte noticed Joshua's trembling fists and called out to him. His dark hair was shot through with white and gray, and his face well-defined and deep-set. Though his frame was slender, it was clear even under his white jacket that his muscles were well-exercised. Medals lined his chest, glaring brightly at anybody who laid eyes on them. He looked quite a bit older than Joshua. Stronger, too.

Even though he was on the brink of old age, and without him showing any outward display of strength, Arcus could already tell he was superior to Joshua in every single way.

Since Charlotte was with him, Arcus guessed he was her father: commander of the eastern martial houses and a military leader, Purce Cremelia.

The count had a stern frown on his face as he spoke to Joshua again. "I am not impressed by a father who strikes his own child without even giving him a chance to explain."

"If I may be so bold, My Lord, this is a private matter. It is our prerogative to teach our children the difference between right and wrong."

"Are you perhaps suggesting that the Cremelia house is not involved in this situation?"

"My Lord, I would never—"

"Our daughter was also kidnapped. Deciding how to handle the culprit should be a joint decision, don't you think?"

Joshua had no reply.

Even if the count pulled his excuse out of thin air, Arcus was grateful for the

intervention. Purce turned to him.

“You are Arcus Raytheft, are you not?”

“Yes, My Lord. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.” Arcus took to his knee and bowed in the same way he had for Charlotte.

The count’s gaze remained stern, but his voice was gentle. “You may rise.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“Although I am still unaware of the particulars, it would seem I owe you a great deal for my daughter’s safety.”

“Not at all, My Lord. It was due to our carelessness that Your Lordship’s daughter was involved in the first place.”

Charlotte immediately stepped forward. “Father, none of this is Arcus’s fault. The marquess was the one who kidnapped us. Arcus came gallantly to our aid.”

“Father, this kidnapping is my fault,” Lecia said to Joshua. “Please do not blame Arcus for this. Allow me to take responsibility.”

“L-Lecia...” The uncertainty was plain to see on Joshua’s face.

“As you can see, Joshua, that seems to be the truth of the matter. It would be nonsense to blame your son when Marquess Gaston was at fault.”

“As you wish, My Lord,” Joshua said, stepping back from Arcus.

As Arcus expected, he did not look happy about it. Just like Joshua, it seemed the count already knew more or less what happened. As Arcus was wondering where the source of their information was right now, he was suddenly buffeted by a hot wind, which was followed by a scorching sensation on his skin. Nothing nearby was burning, so where had it come from?

Arcus turned. There stood the majestic Craib Abend, the air around him rippling with a furnace’s heat. His military jacket was slung around his shoulders, and he had enough glittering medals on his chest to compete with the count. His sleeves were rolled up, revealing arms covered in scars and burns. In his mouth was a large cigar emitting thick, purplish smoke.

There were magicians and shouts of conflict all over the grounds. Craib

strolled across the battlefield casually, as if he enjoyed the marquess's tacky garden. The waves of power rolling from him were even more impressive and overwhelming than Joshua's or even Purce's.

Joshua and his troops turned their attention toward him. A single glare from Craib sent them all gulping and, if Arcus's eyes didn't deceive him, trembling. It was either rage or the thrill of war that was causing the air around his uncle to crackle with tension. The soldier then began to make his way toward Arcus in silence.

"Sup, brat. This is quite the mess you've made for us, huh?"

"Ow!"

Craib's fist came crashing down on Arcus's head, leaving him reeling.

"Think you could wait for me to get my crap together before you start stormin' noble houses next time?" Craib sighed and shook his head, but even he should know that Arcus couldn't afford to wait.

"Y-You heard what happened, right?" Arcus asked.

"Yeah, and that's why I'm so mad! You even went and got yourself locked up in the Tower."

Just when Craib was on the verge of giving Arcus a lecture, Charlotte approached them.

"Hello, Crucible," she greeted.

"Ah, Lady Charlotte. So glad to see you're safe."

"The marquess tried to kill us, and I am sure he would have succeeded had Arcus not come when he did. I believe he was right to move as quickly as he did so."

"I understand that, Milady, but even then, I think he deserves a wallop."

"Is that so? Well, do not let me stand in the way of your good judgment." Charlotte returned to her father, who Craib addressed next.

"Sorry to put Your Lordship through all this trouble."

"I cannot allow you to apologize to me, Crucible. We have already established

who is at fault here.”

“Milord.”

Arcus was somewhat surprised to see that even his uncle could behave himself when dealing with nobility. Once their brief exchange was over, Purce turned his gaze to Arcus.

“I hear the young Arcus is your pupil.”

“Yes, Milord. He never fails to surprise me and keeps every day interesting.”

“I daresay he would. However, I fear you may be teaching him more than is appropriate for his age. To break out of the Holy Tower, and then to launch an attack on the marquess with only a small group of men in the span of hours... I can barely believe it.”

“Actually, Milord, I’m holding back on him.”

“What?! You call that holding back?!” Arcus cut in, memories of being forced to run around for hours flashing before his eyes.

“Yeah, ‘course. What? You want somethin’ more challengin’?”

Arcus only just managed to hold back the frightened squeak that rose in his throat. The very idea that Craib’s intense training program wasn’t the worst he was capable of made him shudder.

The count chuckled at the look on Arcus’s face.

Meanwhile, Joshua was keeping a sharp eye on Craib. “Brother.”

“Joshua, we’re investigatin’ the estate. I don’t think there’s any doubt that the marquess is gonna be charged, though.”

“Do you not think it would reflect poorly on our house to make such a fuss over this?”

“C’mon, quit being a sissy. If you don’t want that to happen, then you gotta sort it out yourself.”

Joshua gave a quick tut before looking away. Just then, Arcus remembered something he was meaning to ask. Unfortunately for him, that question was for the marquess, who was currently unconscious. Arcus began to kick him awake.

It was a very satisfying feeling.

“Gah?!”

“Get up.”

Gaston opened his eyes and, for a split second, seemed confused. The moment he realized where he was, he glared at Arcus.

“How dare you kick me?” Gaston spat.

But then he was speechless. He must have felt the intense presence of the three men standing around him—of Purce and Craib, and even Joshua, who seemed to be over his anxiety.

Though they were all aware of Gaston’s status, they were willing to put their mandated respect for him aside for the sake of the kidnapped girls. Their expressions overflowed with paternal rage.

There was the general and his aide-de-camp, as well as one of the most powerful soldiers in the kingdom. All three of these men were telegraphing their hatred toward the marquess. Even an ordinary person would struggle to hold their nerve in this situation, and, of course, the marquess could do no better.

His face ran pale, and he let out a strangled cry. Cold sweat beaded on his forehead.

“We have much to discuss with Your Lordship, but I believe the royal family is owed an explanation first and foremost,” Purce said in a cool voice.

“D-Do not think you can get away with treating me like this just because of your social standing!”

“If Your Lordship wishes to fight, then I have no problem with that. I, of course, have the entire military power of the eastern side of the kingdom at my disposal. I do hope Your Lordship is ready.”

Gaston could do nothing but let out an awkward groan. Taken at face value, the east’s military power made up a quarter of the entire kingdom’s forces. In practice, he would need other nobles’ consent to send them all into battle, and it was unlikely that they would all be battle-ready, but it was a powerful threat

nonetheless.

“I have a question,” Arcus said to Gaston.

“And you think I’ll answer it?”

“Doesn’t matter if you do or not. Have your men captured the official who stole those documents from you?”

“Oh? Yes, they have.”

“Where is he?”

Gaston stayed silent. Apparently, he didn’t know himself.

“Have you even seen the guy yourself?”

“No.”

“So you acted entirely on second-hand information?”

Again, the marquess was silent.

“I thought so.”

Suddenly, Gaston was suspicious. “What are you getting at, boy?”

“Who knows?”

“Are you done with him, Arcus?” asked Craib.

“Yeah. I’m done.”

“Returning to the previous subject,” Purce cut in, “I believe we should keep the children out of this from now on. We adults should be the ones to bring everything to a close.”

“Milord.”

“My thoughts exactly, My Lord.” Joshua and Craib added their assent.

With one last glare at Arcus, Joshua pulled Lecia away from him and took her to her mother. Celine wasted no time in embracing her daughter, the emotion at having her back safe and sound plain on her face.

A jolt ripped through Arcus’s chest. He thought he was over all of this, but there was that pain again. How ironic that it should be the display of his former

parents' humanity that hurt most of all. For a while, Arcus stood there unmoving.

"So they all hate ya? 'Cept your sister?" Cazzy suddenly asked.

"Yeah. They hate my guts."

"Even though ya just saved her? I'd throw a fit."

"I'm not happy about it, either."

Sensing it was best to drop it, Cazzy made no further comment. Arcus quickly slapped his own cheeks—this was no time to be moping around.

"Anyway, there's more important stuff to worry about."

"Yeah? Whazzat?"

"There's somewhere I wanna go after this. Wanna come with us, Cazzy?"

"Huh? After what?" Cazzy blinked.

"What? You mean you're not done here?" Craib asked, overhearing them.

"Not yet," Arcus replied, noticing Noah's well-timed return.

He reappeared from the depths of the night, just like the ninjas of the man's world.

"Master Arcus."

"Hey. What did you get?"

"As you suspected, the culprit is keeping an eye on the scene."

"And you're sure it's the right guy?"

"He matches Miss Lecia's description exactly."

"Is he from the Surveillance Office after all?"

"It would appear so."

Cazzy turned his puzzled gaze to Noah. "Oh, yeah. Thinkin' of it, ya did disappear the moment we came outside."

"Indeed, under orders from Master Arcus."

Craib put a knowing hand to his chin. "So that's why you asked the marquess

about the officer. I think I get what you're up to now..."

"Wanna come with us too?" Arcus offered.

"Nah, I gotta go back to investigate the marquess's place. Gotta find whatever we can before anything 'goes missing.' Go get what you guys can, yeah?"

"Good luck," Arcus said.

"Listen, Arcus, I know kids are supposed to cause trouble, but you think you could maybe tone things down a bit from now on?"

Arcus gave only a sheepish grin in response. Craib sighed.

"C'mon, at least lie to me and say you will. If you don't learn how to lie, your future's gonna be a tough one."

"H-Huh?"

What values was Craib trying to teach him exactly? Arcus shook his head; that didn't matter right now.

"Where is he then, Noah?"

"If you would follow me..." Noah began to lead the way.

Finally, they were going to meet the mastermind behind the entire plot.

Countess Lisa Lauzei, Chief Officer of the Surveillance Office, rode hell-for-leather on a horse so black that it was almost invisible in the night, bearing down on the Gaston estate. It was all so she could carry out the order Sue gave her.

"If you fail to carry out this investigation to the utmost, then you know what is to happen to your head, don't you?"

The threat spurred Lisa forward. Sue was gentle and kindhearted and usually would not have made such a violent suggestion. Or if she had, she wouldn't mean it seriously.

But this time it was different. There was real rage in that cool voice of hers as she spoke. Lisa had very little doubt that, if she failed here, Sue would rip her head off with her own two hands.

She wasted no time in launching an investigation to uncover what went on behind the scenes in this entire case. She knew Gaston had men within the Surveillance Office. With the disturbance centered on the estate's grounds, the perpetrator had to be nearby. Though the risk of capture by either the Raythefts or the Cremelias was high, that was exactly why they needed to keep a close eye on things. They must have been observing from a safe distance.

Lisa thought she knew where that might be. Dismounting, she searched the area. She found him in a dark street in the noble district: a man in a cloak among the damp smells of the alleyway.

He looked unremarkable—interchangeable with any other man in the street, but for the dark circles under his eyes and the vague air of gloom he gave off. If he fell into a crowd, it would be impossible to pick him out.

He stood atop a wall, watching the ruckus at the estate unfold through his glasses.

"Rosworth," called Lisa.

"My, if it isn't Lady Lauzei. Or should I be calling you Chief Officer Lauzei at the moment? Either way, what might bring Your Ladyship here?" Rosworth jumped down from the wall and gave her a warm smile.

That smile unsettled Lisa. You would be hard-pressed to think it anything other than sincere, but to her its curve seemed unnatural.

"I remembered that you were involved in the marquess's case."

"Indeed. I was the one who infiltrated His Lordship's estate."

"Then explain yourself, Rosworth."

Rosworth frowned, as though he didn't understand her words. "Well, it is quite the stirring tale. The marquess abducted a young noble girl, and her brother conducted a marvelous rescue. Will that do for an explanation?"

"No. I want you to explain your involvement in this fiasco to me."

Rosworth stayed silent.

"Answer me!" Lisa barked.

At her shout, his shoulders began to shake. Was he scared? Angry?

It was neither of those things. His shoulders were shaking with the effort to contain his laughter. No longer able to bear it, that laughter escaped.

“Rosworth!”

“It’s really quite simple, My Lady!” he said between chuckles. “In order to investigate the marquess, I impersonated one of his servants. However, His Lordship is rather crafty. The evidence I could find was circumstantial at best. Therefore, I decided to use that evidence to trap him. To push him into kidnapping a pair of noble children, a crime from which he could not escape.

“He won’t be able to talk his way out of capture or investigation now. Once he is caught, we can investigate him at our leisure. A genius plan, is it not?”

Of all the possibilities, Lisa would never have guessed that *this* was what Rosworth was thinking. Fundamentally, the plan made sense. Legally speaking, however, it was dicey at best. If the public heard about Rosworth’s actions, then not only would he suffer for them, but so would the entire office.

Just then, a look of disappointment came over Rosworth’s face, as though his plan hadn’t gone so well after all.

“I just never imagined the marquess would be attacked before I could gather the other officers.”

“You’re talking about the Raytheft boy?”

“Yes. I never thought he would escape from the Tower, much less succeed in an attack launched with only three members. And yet people say he has no talent.”

“A spurious rumor of the viscount’s. While it is true he does not possess the same reserves of aether as his ancestors, his talents as a magician are comparable to graduates of the Institute—or so I have heard.”

That was what Sue told her, anyway. As someone who studied magic alongside Arcus, she should know. Apart from anything else, Sue herself was a powerful mage who received the finest magical education in the kingdom. Even if her fondness for him was affecting her judgment, from her words, Arcus could

not possibly be talentless.

“Either way, it’s a nuisance to lose so much hard-earned credit to him. Ah, but do not worry, Your Ladyship. No evidence remains that I ever snuck into the estate at all.” A malevolent grin spread across Rosworth’s face. “Didn’t I do a good job?”

“A good job at resorting to desperate measures because you couldn’t find any useful evidence, yes.”

Rosworth’s face fell. Lisa’s pitiless violet eyes met his.

“You’re the one who got the Raytheft girl involved too, aren’t you?”

“Yes, My Lady.”

“Why her?”

“Simply because the Raythefts live in close proximity to the Gaston house, and they both hold territory in the east. Lately, the marquess has hosted many of the martial families at his private revels. I feared his aim was to eventually join forces with them. The royal family do not look kindly on nobles whose reach exceeds their grasp, and I don’t think they would have ignored this, either.”

Rosworth’s account held water with Lisa; she had heard many of the same rumors. Even if these houses continued to swear loyalty to the King after joining forces, it would do little to dispel the King’s fears of sedition. He preferred to run the country on his own terms, and any interference would be purely detrimental in his eyes. At the moment, the royal family held the nobles of the kingdom in an iron grip. Powerful as they were, any hint of nobles forming alliances and taking liberties beyond their station was frowned upon.

“That is why I did what I did. No one would ever suspect that a young girl from one of the marquess’s favored families would hold evidence that could expose his corruption. If the marquess ever found out about it, the trust between the two houses would shatter. Even if I couldn’t come up with a crime to pin on him, at the very least I could drive a wedge between them.”

Rosworth’s explanation just raised more questions.

“Why did you not inform any officials of the kidnapping the moment it happened? Your aim was to bring down the marquess. Just reporting the kidnapping would have been enough to do that.”

“Indeed, but imagine if he killed them? Even the marquess would have a hard time escaping punishment, and even if he did, war would be unavoidable. Powerful though he may be, his opponents would be the Raythefts, one of the three viscount families under the Cremelia house, leader of the eastern houses. The Cremelias would no doubt join the fighting, too, crushing the Gaston house underfoot while all of the eastern houses in the conflict suffered.”

He was right again. Killing the children of a noble house was one crime Gaston would definitely be punished for; if not by the state, then by the girls’ fathers. They would use every tool at their disposal to destroy the marquess.

By now, Lisa was realizing that Rosworth’s plan went much further than she thought. He even wanted to cause a conflict that would divide the entire kingdom. Counts and marquesses held two of the highest-ranking positions among the gentry; any conflict between them would inevitably lead to chaos on a large scale, dragging in houses that weren’t originally involved.

Even if the crown intervened to stop the fighting before it began, the grudges would run deep. Either way, the kingdom’s fighting power would be damaged.

“Much as I appreciate your loyalty to the King, how can you justify putting the life of a ten-year-old child at risk?”

“How can we be so naive to speak of justice in a situation like this? Surely it is only right to do whatever is needed to attain one’s goal, even if that involves sacrificing a child?”

“And even after that, you want me to believe that your actions were carried out with the kingdom’s best interests at heart?”

“Of course, My Lady.”

“Nonsense. The only thing you were thinking of was your career.”

Rosworth grinned, not denying anything.

“How dare you...” Lisa growled.

Rosworth risked the well-being of the kingdom and its citizens for his own gain without thinking anything of it. How did that make him any different from the corrupt marquess? Their actions harmed the kingdom, its people, and those who worked hard every day for its benefit. The kingdom would not tolerate such self-centeredness, and yet Rosworth continued as though he were proud of his behavior.

“Lady Lauzei, this is just how things are these days. Such schemes as mine are what lead to an individual’s success. Pardon me, but Your Ladyship will never make it very far clinging to such naive ideals.”

“Why you...!”

Who did he think he was, giving her “advice” like that? Rosworth’s self-satisfied smile never faltered, and Lisa was starting to reach the end of her tether.

A voice sounded from the direction of the full, glittering moon:

“Thanks. I guess I should stop being so naive too, then.”

“Huh?!” Rosworth gawked, his undignified voice echoing through the alley, turning this way and that until he found the source.

“This is my last shot. You should be grateful I’m using it on you.”

The next moment, a dry *crack* split the air. Rosworth slumped and fell to the ground as though every last drop of energy had suddenly been sapped from his body. His eyes frozen open, blood ran from his head, spilling out into a sticky puddle.

Lisa looked up at the rooftops. There, against the backdrop of the full moon, stood three figures.

“Are you Arcus Raytheft?” she asked.

“Oh, you’ve heard of me? Ah—that guy called you ‘Lady,’ didn’t he?” The silver-haired boy looked down at her, kneeling on one knee with his arm leaning on the other.

There was no doubt in her mind that this was the boy who launched the attack on Gaston.

“That is the countess, Lady Lisa Lauzei,” the elegant indigo-haired man next to Arcus explained. “Her Ladyship is the Chief Officer of the Surveillance Office.”

Lisa knew this young man, too. He was Noah Ingwayne, a magician of vanishingly rare talent. Despite the unstable footing of the rooftop, he was keeping an excellent posture as he stood in wait next to his master. The intelligent glint behind his monocle was surveying her quietly.

“Huh? So you’re the Chief Officer now, Lisa? Man, I haven’t seen ya since graduation!” the third man cackled.

“Cazzy!”

He looked to be in his mid-twenties. His eyes had a sharp slant to them. His dark hair was longer than it was then, like he hadn’t bothered to get it cut, but there was no way she could forget that peculiar laugh.

Cazzy Guari. He was the first commoner to graduate from the Institute at the top of his class, and he was in the grade above Lisa. Now that she thought about it, she had seen him escaping the Holy Tower with Arcus. He was grinning down at her, sitting on the roof like it was an overstuffed sofa.

“You know each other, Cazzy?” Arcus asked.

“Both went to the Institute, didn’t we? Though Lisa ain’t a magician herself.”

“Why did you kill this man?” Lisa interrupted their chat.

“I just wanted to see the guy who put my sister in danger. Can’t say he was anything I wasn’t expecting.”

“You knew he was involved? Never mind that, you knew he was *here*?”

“Yeah, thanks to my awesome servant.”

Lisa had heard that Noah carried out his work flawlessly, both when he was studying at the Institute and when he was working under the Crucible. It seemed not much had changed.

“There is no need to praise me, Master Arcus. If you must reward me, please consider giving me a generous raise.”

“You’ve been mentioning a raise a lot lately. Saving up for something?”

“I’m afraid money and what it can buy is the only thing that would permit me to endure your harebrained schemes.”

“Endure them? You’re supposed to be on my side!”

“You may call it ‘dirty money’ to use it to such ends; however, I believe the subjectivity of the matter is for the philosophers to ponder and for me to comfortably ignore.”

“So now you’re making fun of my whole money speech?!”

“C’mon, guys. Company, yeah?” Cazzy muttered.

At first glance, the three looked incredibly mismatched, but somehow they seemed to be making it work.

Arcus gave a quick cough before returning to the previous subject. “This entire situation was suspicious from the start. The servant who gave Lecia the evidence already knew her name, and the marquess found out about it almost the moment she had it.”

“Furthermore,” Noah added, “if the servant’s life was truly in danger, he should have fled the estate as soon as he rid himself of the evidence. That he didn’t is dubious, to put it mildly.”

“The rest writes itself. First he gave the evidence to Lecia. Then he quickly reported the missing evidence to the marquess and gently persuaded him to kidnap her. That’s what happened, right?”

“In all likelihood, yes,” Lisa agreed. “However, that does not explain how you tracked him down.”

“If he was playing the part of the marquess’s faithful servant again, he must’ve been in the estate. We searched once things calmed down but never found him, so I realized he was probably keeping an eye on things nearby. I asked Noah to look for him, and I don’t have to explain to you how that panned out.”

It was the same train of logic Lisa herself followed, borne from the same spark of suspicion.

“Anyway, he’s my deposit,” Arcus said, motioning to Rosworth’s body.

“Deposit?”

“Right. In exchange for dealing with him, I want you to make sure the marquess gets what he deserves and that the Raythefts aren’t blamed for anything.”

“You really expect me to agree to that, when you just appeared out of thin air and murdered one of my officers?”

Lisa looked up at him in exasperation; she could see the rage in his ruby eyes.

“You have no choice,” Arcus threatened darkly.

Though he was just a child, his tone reminded Lisa of a fully-grown noble.

“What if I were to refuse?” she asked.

“I’ll just take another approach.”

“That approach being?”

“Remember how Rosworth opened my eyes? Taught me to stop being naive?” Arcus paused, his eyes narrowing. “I’ll tell the whole world that the Surveillance Office was involved in this incident, and that the officer was following your direct orders.”

“Wh—”

“It’s a decent threat, right? The nobles already hate you guys enough as it is. It won’t just be your neck on the line if that rumor spreads.”

He was right. Even if the office could survive such a thing, its overseers would clamp down, and Lisa and those close to her would not escape with their lives.

“The crown would have to feign ignorance. Since the office is under their direct control, its reputation would never recover if people thought the royal family was involved, too.”

“And you think people would believe you? You’ve just killed the main witness.”

“I think that’ll make things easier, personally. Dead men tell no tales, and that includes tales that would contradict mine.”

“I hardly see how that would benefit you.”

“In that case... how about this?”

At his words, the two men next to him began to move.

“My apologies, Lady Lauzei. I am afraid we will have to take Your Ladyship into our care.”

“Sorry, Lis. ’Fraid our fun school days are over.”

“Cazzy...” Lisa took a step backward.

She had confidence in her abilities, but not enough to take on both Noah and Cazzy at once. The Winter Wunderkind’s talents were recognized by Mercuria String, a well-known state magician. Then there was the Pinioneer, a magician who excelled over his noble peers in the Institute to be named top of the class.

That was before even mentioning Arcus Raytheft. Lisa still couldn’t work out how he killed Rosworth, and she knew to move with the utmost caution around anyone she understood so little.

Lisa was outclassed and outnumbered. If they captured her here, they would likely bring her to Count Cremelia and name her as the mastermind behind the kidnapping. In such a scenario, she wouldn’t be able to count on the royal family to help her out. They would be too focused on self-preservation.

She was caught between a rock and a hard place. Frustration bubbled up inside her. Thinking rationally, she realized there was no need to be so stubborn here. If Lisa reported Rosworth, he likely would have been severely punished, if not made to meet the same fate.

She could always report Arcus—but then she risked facing Sue’s wrath. The last time that happened, Lisa only just managed to keep her head. She could still remember the icy fear that ripped through her as she pondered how easily Sue could liberate her head from her shoulders.

The idea of resisting didn’t even cross her mind. The difference in strength between them would render any attempt worse than useless. That Sue was only eleven years old had nothing to do with it.

“I don’t think it’s a bad deal for you, personally,” Arcus said. “All you need to do is pretend you don’t know anything about what that dead guy did. The

marquess is the only one left to punish, and you have nothing to lose. In fact, people'll probably praise the Surveillance Office for what a good job it did weeding out his corruption."

His words showed he had complete control over the situation. Cremelia, Raytheft, and the Crucible were all at the marquess's estate right now, combing it for every last shred of evidence to prove his corruption. There would be nothing left for the Surveillance Office to find. Lisa had no choice but to accept Arcus's threat.

"Very well. I shall do all I can to bring Marquess Gaston to justice, and I shall make sure the Raytheft house takes absolutely none of the blame. In return, you shall keep quiet about the Office's involvement in the matter. I shall work as quietly as possible so that victims can keep their dignity."

"Thanks. I hope you'll keep your promise." Arcus turned around and vanished into the moonlight.

Noah bowed in Lisa's direction as Cazzy made to follow after them.

"Cazzy."

"See ya, Lis. Good luck with it all, yeah? Hope it all goes smoothly for ya!" Cazzy cackled before following his companions.

Lisa watched them leave before muttering under her breath. "Is he... Is he really just a child?"

His height, his face, his soft skin. A voice that hadn't yet broken. Physically, he was just like every other ten-year-old boy. And yet the way he spoke and the ideas he came up with were beyond the capabilities of many adults. "Genius" wasn't a powerful enough word to describe him. Lisa looked up at the moon.

"Tell me, twin phantoms. Why was that boy disinherited? Why would you feel the need to punish such an intelligent young boy like that?"

As she expected, neither Chain nor Wedge gave her any response.

The news of Cau Gaston's kidnappings and conspiracy to commit murder shook the kingdom's nobles to their core. They couldn't ignore someone who

would plot such malicious deeds to cover up his own corruption. Even those unrelated to the Raythefts or Cremelias spoke strongly against him, not least because of the Surveillance Office's work in bringing him down. Without anyone on his side, and no way to refute the water-tight evidence against him, the marquess was found guilty.

At present, he was being investigated for any further crimes, after which he would be brought before the King to be sentenced. Meanwhile, the Raytheft and Cremelia houses received no blame for bringing their troops to storm Gaston's estate. They were treated entirely as victims, and their actions to save their daughters' lives were considered justified. It seemed Lisa Lauzei kept her promise, as they weren't even blamed for the countless mercenary deaths from that night. Though those deaths were often spoken of in rumors among the nobility, they were quickly forgotten.

A few days had passed since Arcus stormed Gaston's manor, and the Raytheft estate had a visitor. As soon as Arcus heard someone came to see him, he made his way with Noah down to the reception room. There he found Craib Abend, lounging on the couch like he owned the place and smoking a large cigar.

"Morning, Uncle," Arcus said.

"I swear Arcus, you look more and more girly with each passing day."

"If you don't have anything nice to say, then please don't say anything at all..."

"Sorry! It was the first thing I thought of when I saw you, so I guess I musta said it out loud. Don't worry! You'll be a man soon enough!"

"Really?" Arcus asked.

"I mean... I don't see why not."

"How come you don't look sure? Noah, what do you think?"

"I would have to think about it. I haven't been asked such a difficult question since my final exam at the Institute."

"C'mon, you're supposed to be on my side!" Arcus pouted at his unfaithful servant, whose composed expression didn't even twitch in response.

Craib wasn't alone. Behind him was another man, his long hair entirely slicked back. He was shifting on his feet impatiently. He looked to be in his mid-twenties and had a peculiar set of slanted eyes.

"Sup," he said, as Arcus laid his puzzled gaze on him.

It was far too casual a way to greet a noble at the best of times, but this man looked like a servant, which made it even worse.

"Who are you?" Arcus frowned, though he also had a sneaking suspicion he'd seen this man before.

"Huh? I'm the magician who escaped with you from the Tower! Ya forgot about me already? Damn. Feels bad, man."

Arcus blinked. There was only one man who fit that description.

"Cazzy?! No way. It can't be you!"

"Course it's me! I mean, I knew this get-up didn't suit me, but ya don't have to be so rude 'bout it," Cazzy grumbled.

His morning coat was ever so slightly worn, and the knot in his red tie was halfway down his chest. With the way his hair was slicked back and rock-solid with gel, he still gave off a villainous impression, despite his servant's uniform. This was probably his idea of making himself presentable.



Arcus couldn't help himself. He let out a snort. The next moment, he was practically rolling on the floor with laughter.

Cazzy scowled at him. "Seriously, what's so funny?!"

"It's just... with your evil-looking face, an outfit like that really doesn't suit you!"

To put it frankly, he looked like a mafia boss.

"Really now, Master Arcus. You should know it is rude to laugh..."

"I can see your mouth twitching, you know!"

The next moment, Noah was laughing, too. The veins on Cazzy's forehead looked fit to burst.

It all started after Arcus's negotiation with Lisa Lauzei. Cazzy made to ask Arcus something, and he assumed he wanted his payment like he was promised in the Tower. Instead, he asked Arcus to employ him.

Considering what might lie ahead, Arcus was more than happy to have more members on his team, but he couldn't just accept Cazzy as his servant. Instead, Cazzy underwent training at Craib's place first.

Arcus shot a questioning gaze at his uncle.

"Don't worry, he shouldn't cause you any major problems. I gave him some magic lessons too, but he passed with flying colors."

To be honest, even if Cazzy might have had personality issues, Arcus couldn't pass up the chance to add such a powerful magician to his entourage, since they were so hard to come by.

"Oh, yeah! 'Bout that trainin' of yours! Ya think ya could go a little easier next time? I didn't think I'd survive to even be this kid's servant."

"Hey, remember your manners. You're speakin' to a state magician, y'know."

"Ow! Let go! What's a magician like you need such buff arms for anyhow?! C-C'mon, let go of me!" Cazzy let out a strangled cry as Craib's grip on his arm tightened.

Though he kicked and struggled, Craib did not let go. Though Cazzy's face was

gradually turning blue, Craib probably thought he was being gentle. Arcus's uncle watched his new servant writhe in agony with a large grin across his face. Eventually deciding he'd been punished enough, he let go.

"I swear, every state magician's a lunatic, a monster, or both... Ow..." Cazzy muttered under his breath.

"Do not worry, Cazzy. It's just him," Noah assured him.

"I swear, Noah, you never used to be this rude when you were workin' under me..."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. I'll chop all that girly hair off as a reward."

Arcus blinked, and the next moment Craib had vanished from the sofa and reappeared behind Noah. Craib ruffled his hair, leaving Noah no time to react. His hair now a mess, Noah scowled at Craib, who responded with a jovial grin.

It was clear who the most powerful man in the room was.

"Oh, so it ain't just me who he bullies!" Cazzy cackled.

"Indeed, although I am looking forward to the day I can turn the tables."

"Good luck!" Craib gave an exaggerated sigh before reclaiming his spot on the couch. "Anyway, Cazzy, all you've got left is to sort out the attitude. Once that's done, you'll be close enough to a decent servant."

"Talkin' posh ain't really my forte." Cazzy cackled again.

Just then, there was a knock at the door. It opened, revealing Lecia.

"Hello, Uncle."

"Oh, hey, Lecia."

"I heard you were here, and so I came to see you. Good morning." Lecia gave a small curtsy.

"Mornin'."

She then noticed Cazzy. "Oh! Are you the man who came to rescue me with Noah and my brother?"

“Huh? Oh yeah, I am.”

“You mean: That would be correct,” Craib cut in.

“I told ya, I can’t speak posh!”

“Are you kiddin’? You’re practically fluent in the Elder Tongue, but you can’t ‘speak posh’?”

“Oh yeah? You try doin’ it, then!”

“I can do it when I need to. C’mon, you need to learn your place.”

“Ruddy nobles...”

Lecia stepped up to Cazzy. “Thank you ever so much for coming to my rescue. Thanks to your actions, neither Charlotte nor myself were harmed.”

“Uh, no problem.”

“You are to be working with my uncle or my brother from now on, yes? Well, I shall look forward to seeing you again.”

“Sure thing.”

““Yes, madame,”” said Noah.

“Yes... ma’am,” Cazzy finally managed, as though the words felt strange on his tongue.

Cazzy’s cheeks pinkened slightly as Lecia let out a small, dignified giggle.

“I dunno if I deserve this kinda praise, y’know?” Cazzy commented to Arcus.

“Sure you do. I’m Lecia’s brother, and Noah is my servant, so saving her was kind of our duty. But you have no connection to her at all. Of course she’s grateful.”

“So that’s it, huh?”

“Yeah. Let her be grateful, even if you do look kinda evil.”

“That’s got nothin’ to do with it.”

Mysteriously, neither Craib nor Noah seemed to have any objection to Cazzy speaking to Arcus like that.

"I shall excuse myself now, Uncle. I must be returning to my magic studies," said Lecia.

"Sure. Work hard, yeah?"

"I shall do my very best." With another curtsy to her uncle, Lecia left the room.

"She's saying that a lot lately, huh?" Arcus remarked to Noah once she'd gone.

"I have heard Miss Lecia say it a fair few times, yes."

"She'll probably end up a workaholic..."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Uh, never mind."

Workaholic must have been something Arcus picked up from his dream.

Finally, Craib returned to the matter at hand. "So anyway, Guari'll probably be ready to become your full-time servant soon."

"Sounds good. As long as you don't mind working for me, Cazzy."

"Course. I was the one who asked, remember?"

"I know, but..."

Cazzy was a powerful magician; he could work wherever he wanted. Arcus worried that becoming his servant meant he was wasting his potential. It seemed Cazzy didn't share his concerns.

"Ya look like the kinda boss who pays real good."

"I'm a ten-year-old kid with no job."

"Maybe you're dirt poor now, but once ya announce your aethometer-doodad, I bet you'll be rollin' in it."

"Yeah, but that'll be a while."

"Don't worry. I'll keep everyone plenty entertained while we wait."

"All right. In that case, I'll be glad to have you."

“Thanks. Lookin’ forward to it!”

And so, Cazzy was to work under Arcus once again.

“I gotta repay my debt to ya somehow.”

“Huh? Did you say something?”

“Nah, don’t worry about it.”

Craib watched the pair with a smile on his face. With another ally on his team, Arcus’s future was looking like a bright one.

Epilogue

The Silver Room's walls were coated with mortar mixed with lime, giving it an ashen hue. It seemed far too bleary to belong to the magnificent and lavish royal castle. The room was empty, aside from a gorgeous chair, which clashed with its bleak surroundings.

As a favored class within the kingdom, most nobles would get away with a light slap on the wrist or a small fine for their misdeeds—up to a point. Any noble found to have committed a serious crime was taken to the Silver Room to receive their sentence directly from the king. Very few escaped with a sentence lighter than death.

In this world, there were no courtrooms or trials to identify whether a person had done right or wrong; nothing to determine the weight of their punishment. In this world, everything fell under the king's judgment. Despite the favoritism he might show toward certain classes, the range of sentences he gave out was extremely limited.

Today, Marquess Cau Gaston was brought before the prince, Ceylan Crosellode. There, in the Silver Room, he was to be judged for his corruption, kidnapping, and conspiracy to harm the daughters of another noble family.

No longer dressed in his flashy noble wear, the marquess instead donned a shabby robe to denote his status as a criminal. A shadow of his former, majestic self, the most he managed was to shave his haggard face for his audience with royalty. Bruises dotted his arms and legs, still fresh from his interrogation.

Above him, in the single chair, sat the prince, staring down at him listlessly and leaning his chin on his hand. His white clothes were adorned with blue and gold embroidery, much like the Asian royalty of the man's world. Not one inch of his skin was exposed, and his face was covered by a dark veil.

In the presence of the prince, Gaston was totally ensnared by panic. Even in his final moments facing Arcus, he was able to keep his composure. But now he kept his forehead plastered to the floor as he begged for forgiveness. His entire

body was trembling and covered in a sheen of cold sweat. He knew his fate was already sealed.

But it wasn't just fear of death that caused the marquess to shake. It was Ceylan's rage. The quiet rage that he could feel emanating from beneath the prince's veil. That rage seemed to pierce the marquess's skin, its weight crushing down on him like he was a bug beneath the prince's heel. It wasn't just Gaston who could feel it, either, but the witnesses and Ceylan's guards, too. Everyone present shook in fear at the prince's silent rage. After a long, long time, he finally opened his mouth.

"On behalf of my father, Shinlu Crosellode, I shall be leading these proceedings. Are there any objections?" His voice, similar in tone to a young boy's, echoed around the room.

In perfect, choreographed unison, the guards pierced the ground with their spearheads and stamped one foot.

"As citizens of the kingdom..."

"We have not a single objection..."

"Against the honorable will..."

"Of Your Royal Highness!"

Their declaration stopped cleanly at the exact same moment. Eulid Rain, the proficient young guard by the prince's side, spoke.

"Raise your head, Marquess. His Royal Highness is giving you an opportunity to speak."

"S-Sir!" Gaston replied, though he kept his head firmly on the floor.

It was well known in the kingdom that one mustn't raise their head the first time permission was given.

"Raise your head."

Once the order was repeated, Gaston did as he was told, setting his eyes upon the prince's dark veil. It slanted to one side along with the prince's cocked head, giving just a small glimpse of his mouth.

“Y-Your Royal Highness, it is an honor for me to be here in Your Royal Highness’s exalted presence. The grievances I have committed in this kingdom are utterly inexcusable.” Gaston paused, swallowing before he went on. “I understand completely that I have shown an egregious error of judgment; however, if I might speak in my defense...”

“Are you saying you object to my decision in this matter?” Ceylan interrupted.

“O-Of course not! I would never... H-However...”

“That’s enough, Marquess. If you have no objections, there is no need to continue, unless you are trying to mock His Royal Highness?” Eulid warned sharply, causing Gaston to cower.

Eulid’s intimidating air was different from Ceylan’s, and similar to what Gaston felt when he was brought to the noblemen in his own garden. It was the kind that only a soldier could possess. Of course, it didn’t hold a candle to the count’s overwhelming presence, but combined with the intimidation he felt from the prince, Gaston could barely keep his thoughts together.

But he wasn’t completely overwhelmed. He couldn’t afford to be; if he kept his mouth shut here, he would be beyond saving. He had to keep talking, disrespectful as it was.

“P-Please! Sir, please hear my defense!”

“How dare you?!” Eulid glared daggers at the marquess.

If this were a battlefield, he would already have lost his head.

Ceylan raised a hand to stop Eulid. “I shall hear your defense, Marquess. Speak.”

“Sir! I have always worked diligently for the sake of the kingdom and its development. I would humbly ask that Your Royal Highness not forget that when sentencing me!”

“Ah. I will admit that, with everything you have offered this kingdom, you have the right to make such a request. I am well aware of your generous donations and their salutary effect on the kingdom.”

“D-Does that mean—”

“That I will lessen your sentence? You would like me to weigh your service to this country against the severity of your crimes?”

“Th-That’s right, sir!” Gaston cried.

All at once, he could feel every guard in the room glaring at him. Ceylan, however, remained calm.

“Despite your services, the depth of your corruption is undeniable. Not only have you pulled the wool over the eyes of the Crown, but over the eyes of the entire kingdom and its citizens.”

“But it was all for the kingdom, sir! It was all to make Lainur stronger... better! My evil deeds had a virtuous purpose!”

“A virtuous purpose?”

“Exactly, sir! If I could only be granted some of Your Royal Highness’s infinite mercy...” Gaston lowered his forehead to the floor once more to show that he was done talking.

Ceylan let out a sigh. It wasn’t until its echoes had disappeared into the air that he spoke once more. “My generous father has overlooked your minor transgressions more than once in the past. What he saw as wit and intelligence within you was nothing more than crafty laziness.”

“S-Sir! I promise, I shall do everything I can to change my ways!”

“I was speaking of your minor transgressions only. This time, you have been brought to the Silver Room. Surely you understand what that means?”

“Sir...” Gaston didn’t know how to answer.

Ceylan’s next words were full of exasperation. “So you don’t understand. By your actions, you have threatened the carefully balanced web of bonds that preserves Lainur’s nobility. It was your duty to unite the nobles should this kingdom fall into a crisis, and yet you created a fissure of suspicion between them. Do you really believe I can overlook such a heinous crime?”

If relations between nobles were damaged, other kingdoms could use that weakness as a point of attack, either politically or militarily. Either way, Lainur would fall. Powerful as the kingdom was, there were several other kingdoms

which outclassed it. That was why its nobles were expected to unite in an emergency, by order of the royal family.

“F-From now on I shall work even harder for the sake of the kingdom! Please! Please, have mercy on me! I am willing to change my ways!”

“Is that so?”

“Yes, sir! I swear, if I am pardoned, I shall work myself to the bone for Lainur and for Your Royal Highness!”

Ceylan didn’t reply immediately, instead sinking into thought. To the marquess, it seemed like an eternity before the prince finally spoke again.

“I see. I am impressed by the strength of your spirit.”

“S-Sir! Does that mean—”

“Yes.” Ceylan nodded.

Relief washed through Gaston. The prince heard his pleas and decided to show compassion. Despite the sudden change in Ceylan’s attitude, Gaston was sure of it. The intimidating air coming off the prince before had completely vanished, as though he was never enraged in the first place.

Just then, Gaston had a thought. He promised to work himself to the bone for the kingdom and the prince, but what if the prince took particular note of that last part? What if that had been his plan all along, to bring Gaston here and take his vast financial power for himself by putting him in his debt? To claim Gaston’s newly-found, unshakeable loyalty?

It was quite the scheme. It was no wonder that he was rumored to be some sort of mythical beast by those in other kingdoms. The people would even talk of how the prince’s infinite mercy was enough to have the corrupt marquess change his ways.

A muffled chuckle escaped from underneath Ceylan’s veil. It was a low, chilling sound. Surely, he was laughing because everything was going according to plan. Nevertheless, at least Gaston’s sentence was going to be reduced. To think he was trembling like a baby rabbit just moments earlier. Frustrating as it was to be at the mercy of a mere child, Gaston was just relieved that he could

escape death.

Relief thawing the wheels of his frozen mind, his thoughts moved to what he would do next. First, he would deal with the man who interrogated him. Teach him a lesson by showing him exactly how much pain and humiliation he put Gaston through.

Then there was the boy who caused him to end up here in the first place. Gaston swore he would make him and his allies suffer.

That damned brat...

He would suffer most of all. Even when he was flat on the floor and begging forgiveness, it wouldn't be enough to satisfy the marquess. Gaston would tear off each of his limbs one by one and, when he was helpless as a caterpillar, kill him in the most brutal way possible. That was the only way Gaston could ever get over what the boy did to him. Just imagining it sent a thrill through his chest.

At that moment, Ceylan spoke again. This was it. The moment Gaston would receive a slap on the wrist. The moment the prince would hold him under his thumb for the rest of his days.

"Cau Gaston. I hereby sentence you to death in the name of the King. Your death shall be of far greater service to the kingdom than anything you did during your life."

"What?!"

Gaston couldn't believe his ears. Death. Beheading. Hanging. His life. Gone.

Why was this happening? The prince listened to his defense! He was prepared to show mercy!

Gaston always thought that the prince valued what was beneficial over what was right—just like Gaston himself. That was why he was so sure his life would be spared if he used the rest of it to serve the kingdom.

"You are a pathetic creature. I am not naive enough to fall for your tricks, either," the prince said coolly.

"Wh-What...?"

“I could see your mind moving the moment you caught the faintest whiff of mercy. I have no doubt you leapt instantly to conniving and retribution; in your putrid, gormless cynicism, you drew the conclusion that I meant to bring you to heel.”

“B-But, Your Royal Highness!”

“Cau Gaston. Money and status cannot be used to solve every problem, as you seem to believe. The only reason you are here now is because humans are wont to act according to emotion.”

It was then that Gaston remembered how his actions from years ago prevented him from buying the loyalty of one of the boy’s allies. Was that what the prince was alluding to? But there was no way he knew about that...

“I can see them now. Years worth of regrets, swarming around you.”

The marquess let out a small squeak as a chill ran up his spine. A chill of despair, as though he were facing a terrible beast.

Who was this sitting before him? Was it even human?

Those questions whirled around Gaston’s mind as he failed to produce an answer.

“Your Royal Highness...” he stuttered.

“My judgment is final. I trust you have no objections? As I recall, you mentioned a few moments ago that you wanted to work for Lainur, yes?”

The prince laughed. It was the exact same scornful chuckle as before. So *this* was the prince’s plan all along.

“Wh-Why you...!” Gaston glared at Ceylan, his voice thick with venom.

To speak to royalty in such a manner was utterly unthinkable, but Ceylan hardly seemed to care.

“There we are. Now your true colors are on display for all to see. I suppose this is where some people get the idea that the nobility are swine that walk like men.”

The moment Gaston started glaring at the prince, his guard began to move.

But Caylan raised a hand.

“That’s all right, Eulid. Stand down.”

“Sir. Forgive me, but as part of the royal guard, I cannot allow this man to show you such disrespect.”

“Do not make me repeat myself, Eulid. I have already sentenced this man to death. You wouldn’t want to undermine my sentence, would you?”

“Of course not, sir.”

“Then stand down. Now is not the time for you to act.”

The next moment, Gaston felt the prince’s glare on him from under his veil, forcing another choked squeak from him. His body began to tremble. The threat he felt now was a hundred times worse than that he felt when he was first brought here. A hundred times worse than anything Eulid or the nobles of the eastern military houses could muster.

Gaston’s body urged him to escape from under that gaze as soon as possible. Unable to resist his instincts, he spun around and began to run.

The guards made no move to follow him. They must have been under orders not to, for whatever reason. Gaston wasn’t far from the door now. His mind screamed at him that no one had given chase, and so escape must be close.

“Cau Gaston. The King and those around him are not human. A fool like you would do well to understand that.”

The next second, the marquess tripped and sprawled onto the floor. When he tried to get up, his legs wouldn’t listen to him. He tried to grunt in frustration, but his lungs struggled to draw breath. It was as though the air around him was thinning, as though his organs were slowly being crushed, one by one. All from the immense pressure that Ceylan radiated.

Gaston turned to look over his shoulder. There, his eyes met that dark veil, staring unwaveringly in his direction.

“Pl... Please... help...” Gaston’s whimpers evaporated into the air.

Ceylan began to mutter a spell from the royal arcana, secret to all but the lineage of the kings of Lainur.

Artglyphs floated up around the prince. They circled rapidly before crashing into each other with a loud *crack*. The collisions created several blue flashes, which crashed into the mortar walls and sent a flurry of stone whirling around the room.

There was a strange scent in the air. If Arcus were here, he might have been able to inform the marquess that it was the smell of ozone.

Ceylan brought a hand up lazily in front of him, and the blue lights began to gather there, waiting for his bidding. He opened his mouth.

“...of judgment...”

Those blue, burning-hot lights rushed toward the marquess with a thunderous roar, drowning out his screams and booming in the ears of everyone in the room. After the blinding flash of blue-white light faded, the charred remains of Cau Gaston’s body came into view.



For a while, the room was in total silence, until at last the guards remembered to breathe. They knew the prince was capable of much more powerful magic than that, and yet they were still left with a dreadful fear in their hearts.

Ceylan studied the marquess's remains for a while before speaking again.

"Now, Eulid. Did you manage to track down the mastermind behind this plot?"

"Sir. The mastermind was killed on the night Cau Gaston was captured."

"Did the Chief Officer silence him, I wonder?"

"No, sir. According to the report, the Raythefts' son killed him almost immediately after finishing his attack on the marquess's estate."

"Hm. It seems this Arcus boy is rather sagacious," Ceylan murmured.

"Sir, I can have Arcus Raytheft brought here. He did, after all, launch an attack on a high-ranking noble. Perhaps he ought to be punished, too."

"That will not be necessary," said Ceylan. "This was a dispute between a number of noble households, and they have solved it among themselves. There is no need for the crown to suddenly start poking its nose where it does not belong."

"And what if one side is dissatisfied with the result? I fear they might try to take it out on the crown..."

"That is not a concern. I have already made arrangements to have the marquess replaced, and his affiliates kept under my thumb."

"Is that really wise?"

"It is enough. We have seized the marquess's territory. If I were to ask for any more control than that, my father would tell me I was being greedy."

"Very well, sir."

With the matter settled, Ceylan let out a laugh. "I suppose I ought to be grateful to Arcus Raytheft. Not only did he catch one of the fattest rats in our kingdom, but he also dealt with the pest running around the Surveillance Office. We didn't even need to lift a finger."

The officer had the guts not only to stand up against nobility, but to go through with his plans to trap the marquess. If he were still alive, he would probably expect some sort of reward. Ceylan had no intention of appearing to endorse such cloak-and-dagger antics, even behind closed doors, but it would have been an annoyance nonetheless—one Arcus thankfully expunged before it started.

Ceylan returned his gaze to Gaston's corpse. "Cau Gaston. Your existence was a poison to this land and its people. While you might have further filled the kingdom's coffers, your influence would rot it from within. Getting rid of you was the best thing I could have done."

Ceylan paused, allowing the echo of his words to dissipate before letting out a sigh. "And with that, our kingdom is on the path to power once more."

Side Story: Beyond Respect and Hate

“Sure, go ahead. If you really hate me that much, then feel free to try and kill me anytime you want.”

It was those words that surprised me most of all.

Craib Abend brushed off my surprise attack all in the time it took to finish his cigar, as though he was fully expecting it. He was Crucible, one of Lainur’s prized powerful state magicians. A national hero, he achieved vast military success in the battle against the Empire and played a huge role in suppressing the uprising in the northern region of Rionelles.

His preferred type of magic came from one of the “Ten Fables” in *The Birth of Heaven and Earth*. Specifically, it came from the tale of the “Red Tsunami.” It was a powerful magic that took words from the depiction of the creation of the Iron Mountains, a mountain range also known as the continent’s backbone.

It was said there were only four people in the entire kingdom who could stand up to this man: the King of Lainur, Shinlu Crosellode; Godwald “Vajra” Sylvester; and the two magicians Gastarque “Fortress” Rondiel and Roheim “Waterwheel” Langula.

I already knew this man was much stronger than me. It would be no easy feat to make up the vast distance between us. If frontal attacks wouldn’t work, then naturally I would proceed to try and turn the element of surprise to my advantage.

I came up with a meticulously detailed plan that allowed no room for failure. I was convinced I could defeat him if I could simply apply the full extent of my powers of reason to the matter. Even if he was a state magician, he was just another man, first and foremost. If that was what I focused on, then the gap between us should close, if only by some small margin. And if I could shorten that gap, then victory was just a little closer, too.

I was top of my class at the Royal Institute of Magic. Recognizing this, the

state magicians even granted me a nickname. I was the most powerful magician of my generation. Even the professors at the Institute were blown away by my skills with magic and the sword. It was those skills and my status which allowed me to get closer to this man as a servant. I played the part of his meek, devoted butler.

I worked far harder than any other servant I knew. I followed my master to the battlefield just to study how he fought firsthand.

One year later, I decided I earned enough of Craib Abend's trust, so I launched my surprise attack. In the dead of night, I was to take his head.

That evening, I adulterated the other servants' dinner with a soporific tincture. Then, I extinguished the Sol Glasses that were usually kept on all night and froze one section of the estate.

Craib's specialty was molten iron. One of his favorite attacks involved using its high mass and intense heat to burn his opponents to death. My own abilities were a natural counter. It was for this very battle, this very night, that I devoted myself to the study of water and ice magic during my time at the Institute. Years of intense study, all to kill this man.

I completely turned my back on my family's traditional magic. I knew the extent of my power well—enough to know I wasn't boasting in saying I was talented. I was powerful enough to stab my master in the back.

As it turned out, all the confidence in the world wasn't enough when I was faced with Craib Abend himself. My plan had no chance of discovery. So why, when I opened the door to his bedroom, did I find the state magician sitting there, smoking a cigar? It was just like he was waiting for me. He was sitting back in a cold chair made of black iron. The entire room was already filled with molten iron, as though he was prepared for this fight.

Despite the suffocating heat in the air, his expression was perfectly cool. Seeing him sitting unbothered in the midst of such an infernal scene made him look like a terrible beast.

Caught off guard by his preparedness, I launched my spell. But at this point, the outcome of the battle was already decided.

“The Frozen Sword of Jacqueline.”

“Iron Tsunami.”

The melting iron caught my frozen sword. It wormed out from its source like tentacles and evaporated my weapon in an instant before it was even fully formed. I was unable to dodge as the cooling iron struck me in the stomach.

The fight was over. Every ounce of effort I had put in these past few years disappeared into thin air, just like my sword.

It took every last bit of my strength not to allow myself to give in to the pain as I glared at Craib Abend. But he just sighed.

“I’ve been expectin’ this for a long time, y’know. Kinda had a hunch it’d be today.”

“How? My plan was perfect!”

“Sure. But no one can take me by surprise, y’know? I can feel magic that’s not my own.”

“That’s impossible!”

A magician could only telegraph themselves so dramatically as to allow their opponent to plan ahead with a tremendous expenditure of aether. Otherwise, it was impossible. I did everything to ensure I would go unnoticed before actually entering the room. My preparatory efforts were hardly enough to be perceived.

“I can feel the aether comin’ off most anything. Or, I guess I learned to. It took ages to develop the skill, I can tell you that much.”

So now he was bragging? It still didn’t make sense to me.

“What made you think it was me who was coming?”

Even if he could feel aether, surely he couldn’t identify the owner?

My question didn’t even cause him to bat an eyelid.

“That’s easy. The hostility coming off you all this time.”

“Hostility? I believe I have been very careful to keep such emotions hidden.”

“Yeah, you’ve been keeping it held down, right? Not all of it, though. Now and

then I've felt it seep out from you. Like when I turn my back to you or when you let your guard down. Every time you had an opportunity to kill me, the thought crossed your mind, right?"

I didn't answer his question.

"Noah Ingvayne," Craib began, "how come you want me dead? I never did anything to you, did I?"

"H-How dare you say such a thing?!"

"Ah, I guess I can be a pretty harsh master." A faint smile passed Craib's lips before he looked thoughtfully up at the ceiling. "Honestly, I haven't got a clue. Actually, it's more like there are so many possible reasons that I can't pick the right one."

"You remember the uprising in Rionelles, don't you?"

"The one... with Count Raymen? He let the fight along the northern border spiral out of control, so the King took some of his land and demoted him for it. Put a real burr under his saddle, so he gathered some of the other nobles involved. They called themselves an 'army' and went to war against the kingdom."

"Yes. And you were there, fighting against them!"

"Ah, lemme guess. You were one of the noble kids whose dad lost everything?"

"That's right! I was the son of Baron Swerg!"

"Right. I gotcha." Craib lit another cigar in the manner of someone reminiscing. After a couple of deep puffs, he continued with a sigh. "Walter Swerg. I remember him. He fought to the bitter end, way after Count Raymen ran away with his tail between his legs. The Spellbreaker. Never surrendered, even when he was warned to. Said nobles had a duty to keep fighting or something."

If Craib remembered his name, it meant my father's skills must have impressed him. Craib leaned back and stared at the ceiling, blowing out a puff of wistful smoke.

“You killed my father. I strove to work for you so that I could eventually kill you in return.”

“Right. Tale as old as time.” Again, Craib sighed. “You’re a smart kid, though. You know revenge is pointless, right?”

I said nothing in return; I simply glared at him.

“Even if I killed your dad, it was Count Raymen who really mucked things up. He’s the one who started the whole rebellion because of his weird sense of pride. Without him, none of this would’ve happened.” An anguished look washed over Craib’s face. “But he got away without even a scratch. And now you’re mad at me, ’cause I was the one to destroy Baron Swerg’s territory.”

“You killed everyone! Everyone! You and your rotten sea of molten iron!”

“Yeah, I did.”

“My mother, my father, and every last citizen!”

“Yeah.”

“I’m... I’m the only one left!” I choked.

Everyone else died at this man’s hands. Wishing to dissuade anyone else from following in Count Raymen’s footsteps, the King sent in a troop of state magicians to completely annihilate Baron Swerg’s territory. Not a single citizen remained, whether they resisted or begged for mercy. Just then, Craib allowed his molten iron to evaporate into the air.

“Why... Why don’t you kill me now?” I asked.

“It wouldn’t sit right with me to kill a kid like you.”

“So you pity me? Is that right?”

“I guess you could say that. I’m just not cold-hearted enough to go through with it.”

“If you let me go now, you can be sure that this is not the last attempt I shall be making on your life.”

The corners of Craib’s mouth lifted into a confident smile. “Sure, go ahead. If you really hate me that much, then feel free to try and kill me anytime you

want.”

I had no immediate answer. His casual acceptance of my threat took me by complete surprise. Didn't he realize the danger he was in?

Noticing I wasn't going to say anything, Craib took another puff of his cigar. “Lemme be clear. You can *try* whenever you want, but you won't get anywhere. Even if you magicked up ten copies of yourself, I could still win easy.”

It was clear to me now the man had no sense of modesty. There was a small, haughty smile on his face. He continued to enjoy his cigar before suddenly clapping his hands together, as he'd just remembered something.

“One more thing.”

“What?” I asked.

“You'll do your job properly again from tomorrow, right? Remember, you're still supposed to call me 'sir,' too. Otherwise I'm gonna have to fire you.”

I ignored his words. “...One day, I *will* kill you.”

It was a promise. I would kill him, no matter what. No matter how long it took. I would make him regret taking my threat so lightly. It wasn't just a matter of revenge anymore; it was a matter of pride, too.

I never fulfilled my promise.

Several times I attempted to finish him off once and for all, but each time he was ready for my supposedly-surprise attack. I attacked whenever we were alone together. I attacked whenever his back was turned. I attacked whenever I could, but every time he shrugged it off.

Despite my numerous attempts on his life, Craib left me in his employment, as though it made no difference to him. I never did realize why.

He continued to let me wait on him and trained me in both magic and sword-fighting until I was fully fit to serve a state magician. He was only making his assassin stronger, and it made no sense to me.

When my work was good, he praised me. When I made a mistake, he scolded me. He was strict when it came to my training and loose-lipped when he had a

drink. On the occasions he smiled at me, I felt not a hint of wariness from him.

Another year passed as I continued to serve the state magician and military leader.

It was then that he suffered a serious injury. We were in the middle of battle when he shielded me from a spell that would have pulverized me. Having already used up much of his strength and aether in the fighting, the attack completely overwhelmed him. Hurriedly, I lay him down on a makeshift stretcher, where he lay gasping.

There he was, one of the strongest men I ever knew, struggling to draw breath and completely defenseless. I had never seen him so vulnerable. It was the perfect time to kill him.

I swore to my father's grave that I would seek revenge. But I couldn't do it.

The moment I set my hand on my sword, it all came back to me. The way he praised me when he was pleased with my work, as though no one else could have done it better. Those warm memories melted my icy desire for revenge, and the next thing I knew, I was flagging down a healer to tend to him.

That evening, I asked him. "Why did you protect me, sir?"

"Well. You would've died if I didn't."

"You are my master. There is no need for you to protect me. In fact, I should be the one sacrificing myself for your sake. What makes even less sense is that you protected me despite the fact that I hate you with every fiber of my being."

"Oh yeah. You do, don't you?" Craib murmured absentmindedly.

I sharpened my tone. "Are you even listening to a word I'm saying?!"

"Yeah, I know. You were thinkin' of killing me a couple hours ago, right?"

"I—" I cut myself short, irritated at the lack of severity in his tone.

Craib took my silence as an invitation to speak. "Y'know, there's something I've always wanted to ask you."

"What is it?"

"Is your life fun, what with your obsession of killing me?"

“I have never considered it.”

“Right, 'cause all you ever think about is puttin' me in the dirt.”

“Exactly.”

“Sounds pretty boring to me.” A sad look passed over his eyes. “I’ve seen tons of people just like you. Revenge eats their life up whole. Talkin’ to ‘em’s like trying to chat up an empty skin. Is that what you want to happen to you? Are you already done livin’ your life? ‘Cause there’s still plenty of time for you to turn things around.”

“How dare you say something like that? This is all your fault!”

“Huh. Good point.”

A long silence passed between us, which Craib eventually broke.

“Like I said, it’s not too late to change things now.”

I stayed silent.

“You used to enjoy usin’ magic, right?”

I did. Moreso if I could use it for somebody else’s sake.

“You liked seeing people’s faces light up when you use magic to help them, yeah?”

I did. Those smiles warmed my heart.

“Otherwise, you’d be a terrible servant. You need to like helpin’ people to do a job like that.”

He was absolutely right.

“Why... You took all of that away from me, so why are you...” A sob escaped my lips.

Everything he reminded me of now was something I could never get back. My parents would never praise me again. I couldn’t help out my father’s citizens anymore. I could never see their smiles again.

“How ‘bout this? How ‘bout you pretend you died in that rebellion too, and turn over a new leaf? Your life could be fun and exciting again. It’s not too—”

Late. I knew that was what he was going to say, but I didn't understand how he could be so nonchalant right now.

"My purpose in life is to kill you!"

"So how come you didn't do it when you had the chance? You had the perfect opportunity, but you let it get away."

I could do nothing but let out a frustrated grunt.

"You're done with trying to kill me, right, Noah? You don't wanna live the rest of your life thinkin' about matchin' blood for blood, do you?"

"I..."

He was telling me what I already knew, deep down. My quest for revenge was meaningless. If he hadn't wiped out my homeland, someone else would have. But I had to hate someone for it. Otherwise, everyone who died that day would have died for nothing.

I suddenly understood.

"This is why you have kept me as your servant."

"Yeah, I guess."

Craib was trying to show me that my life could be about more than just revenge, and he prepared me for just such a life with his training. He was trying to show me that I didn't need to hate anyone to lead a fulfilling life. That was how I felt, at least, mild as the feeling was. Now here I was, having accepted his lead onto a new path. Working for him was worthwhile, and when he treated me as a magician, but more than that, as a human being, I was happy. That was exactly why I decided that Craib Abend was a man worth serving.

"Why did it have to be you who came to the Swergs' land that day?"

"I dunno. You'd have more luck askin' Wedge and Chain that kinda thing."

That was the day my fiery desire for revenge burned out. I would never forget the past, but I was no longer able to hold a grudge against the man who set me on a straight path.

"Your life could be fun and exciting again."

All thoughts of revenge gone, those were the words that remained in my mind. Those were the words I decided to strive for.

“You are assigning me a new master, sir?”

“Yeah. Trust me, he needs a new servant with all the stuff he’s pullin’, and I think you’d be perfect for him.”

“But I want to keep serving you.”

“If you do what I tell you and work for him, that means you’re serving me, right?”

“I suppose,” I admitted, though I was unamused by his semantic tomfoolery.

“What? So you’re not gonna follow my orders now?”

“No, I shall. I shall work for this new master,” I said, having no other choice.

“Don’t worry, yeah? He’s even more fun to be around than me. I promise you won’t regret this!”

Afterword

To everyone who has picked up this copy of *The Magician Who Rose From Failure*, it's nice to meet you. My name is Gamei Hitsuji. If you've read some of my works before, then I'm sure you'll agree it's been a long, long time.

I've been uploading *Magician* online, on *Shousetsuka ni Narou*, where it was picked up by GC Novels to be published.

I'm really so grateful I could cry!

Magician is set in a fantasy world where the young protagonist gains and uses his knowledge of our real world to succeed. I'm sure you've seen this kind of reincarnation theme before, but I'd like to think my twist on the trope is a little different.

Maybe you could see it as a quasi-reincarnation of sorts. Most reincarnation stories have the character's previous consciousness move into their new body, or suddenly they remember their old life and start getting excited about their second shot at living.

In this story, the young protagonist has a bad start in life, when he suddenly experiences another man's life without being reincarnated per se. He then uses that man's modern knowledge and worldview to his advantage.

It might sound like I was trying to write a reincarnation story without it *technically* being one, but I have a good reason.

In most of these stories, the reincarnated character is, naturally, the same person they were reincarnated from. In that case, if your protagonist is a young boy, their parents are no longer really their parents, and any friends they had are suddenly much more immature than them. I think these issues arise even when it's just a case of remembering their other life one day and not just when they are consciously reincarnated.

The protagonist will always end up having to pretend to be an innocent child for their parents, who still see them as their ordinary child, and for their friends,

who would be shocked if the protagonist suddenly started acting much older than they were.

Of course, the protagonist could always solve all of this by telling everyone and hoping they believe in reincarnation, but otherwise the protagonist ends up being detached from the story itself. Even in the most dire of scenes, it still feels like the protagonist is just acting and putting on a front the entire time.

It was when I started writing a reincarnation story about a young boy that all these problems got in the way, and I just didn't feel like he fit comfortably inside the world I put him in. Though I will say that many authors do manage to pull these stories off successfully.

To overcome the issues I had, I tried to come up with another way, which resulted in the premise for *Magician*. Arcus is still very much a part of his own world, yet he has knowledge and experience of our modern world. There was no need to worry about conflicting identities. His parents are the only parents he has, and he is able to make friends his own age comfortably. There is nothing contrived such as the plot going out of its way to show the reader he is reincarnated. Instead, he can move through the story as the child he is.

Of course, thanks to his dream, he is still mature beyond his years, but at the very least I feel like I managed to have him blend more naturally into his environment.

If you search through the other stories on *Shousetsuka ni Narou*, I'm sure you'd find pieces that are much more beautifully written than mine and authors who update much more quickly. There are so many stories on there, after all.

I hope that my work has managed to pull off the *isekai* trope as successfully as those.

I'd like to wrap things up by thanking a few people. Firstly, everyone at GC Novels, my editor, K., my illustrator, Saika Fushimi, and finally, all of my readers who continue to support me. Thank you so much.



Black Bullet.
Keep the pale horse galloping through the skies in the blink of Death's eye.

The Magician Who Rose
From Failure Volume 1
Story by Hitsuji Gamei, Illustration by Fushimi Saika

1



Lisa looked up at the rooftops. There, against the backdrop of the full moon, stood three figures. "Are you Arcus Raytheft?" she asked. "Oh, you've heard of me? Ah—That guy called you 'Lady,' didn't he?" The silver-haired boy looked down at her, kneeling on one knee with his arm leaning on the other. There was no doubt in her mind that this was the boy who launched the attack on Gaston.

Glossary

The Elder Tongue

The language magicians use to cast their spells. Its syntax is completely different from the modern language of Lainur, and it is widely believed to be the world's most ancient tongue. Its words hold power, with the conjunction of words, phrases, and the speaker's aether coming together to create spells. The entirety of the Elder Tongue exists within the Ancient Chronicles, a collection of six stories. However, much of the meaning of those texts have been lost to time, keeping it shrouded in mystery.

Artglyphs

The script which the Elder Tongue is written in. The script's appearance can be compared to the astrological symbols used in the world Arcus witnessed in his dream. They are completely different from the script used in the language of Lainur. Artglyphs can also be engraved into objects using special tools, creating a seal. This gives the objects magical properties; Sol Glasses are but one example out of many. Artglyphs are as old as the world itself, born from the Molten Reason; they came together to create meaning and give the world shape.

Spells

Words or syllables that are used to perform magic. Composed from the Elder Tongue, they create magic when uttered and infused with a suitable amount of aether. Spells are extremely flexible; the same effects can be achieved by using different words with similar meanings. Magicians often tweak their spells and use different phrasing in order to heighten a spell's effectiveness. However, certain phrases can clash and cancel each other out, or create unintended consequences. Any magician wishing to create their own spells or amend

existing ones must have a deep knowledge of the Elder Tongue and how it is used in the Ancient Chronicles.

The Ancient Chronicles

A series of texts written in the Elder Tongue. Spanning six extensive volumes, they chronicle the past, present, and future.

Volume 1, *The Birth of Heaven and Earth*, describes the origin of the world and language.

Volume 2, *The Spiritual Age*, describes how the twin phantoms Chain and Wedge refined the world.

Volume 3, *The Prophecy of Shadows*, describes everything from the birth to the death of the world.

Volume 4, *Documenting the Stars*, describes the life of the scholar Megas on his quest to understand the principles of nature.

Volume 5, *The Magician's Elegy*, is an account of a time when magical culture was at its peak and civilization flourished.

Volume 6, *Demons and Society's Collapse*, tells of four demons who will come to destroy the world and their song of destruction.

It is said that the entirety of the Elder Tongue is contained within these six volumes. This claim cannot be verified, however, as there is nobody who can read and understand all of them.

State Magicians

Lainur has recognized these magicians for their exceptional talent. They possess not only extraordinary knowledge, but incredible skill. It is said that even a single State Magician could pose a threat to an entire army corps. They are a symbol of the kingdom's power and together hold a great deal of authority, causing even the highest-ranking of nobles to tremble before them. They are:

Godwald Sylvester, known as Vajra

Gastarque Rondiel, known as Fortress

Roheim Langula, known as Waterwheel

Craib Abend, known as Crucible

Renault Einfast, known as Stronghold

Frederick Benjamin, known as Swordsmith

Muller Quint, known as Welcome Rain

Al Ritsuellie Baldan, known as Swift Wind

Mercuria String, known as Peacemaker

Shurelia Remalion, known as Twisted Karma

Cassim Lowry, known as Blinding Flare

Alicia Rotterbell, known as Dry Spell

To become a State Magician, one must pass the National Diploma of Sorcery, said to be the most difficult exam in the kingdom.

Seals

A method to imbue an object with magical powers by engraving it with magical characters. Objects engraved with seals are called seal tools, and as a magically developed kingdom, these tools see daily use in Lainur. Examples include fire-making tools, curtains that block out all light, and most famously, Sol Glasses. Weapons may also be engraved with seals, making them an

important art to the military. Sorcerer's Silver is an indispensable resource for seal carving, making silver ores a major bargaining chip in military conflict.

Sol Glass

A commonly used light source in the Kingdom of Lainur. Its power comes from seals, and it is made by placing a single fragment of engraved metal inside a glass container. Thanks to Sol Glasses, the setting of the sun does not shut down Lainur's industries; Lainur is able to stand shoulder to shoulder with some of the world's most powerful nations because of this. Previously, Sol Glasses could not be turned off and had to be kept under light-blocking curtains when not in use, but this is changing with some newer versions. Since the newer Sol Glasses must react to their surroundings, it appears that the techniques used to create them, and their energy source, differ slightly from the older versions...

Tempered Aether

A special kind of aether created by "kneading" the magical energy in one's body. An ancient technique, knowledge of it was lost until Arcus rediscovered it through one of Craib's books. Creating this kind of aether requires both considerable control over one's aether and a great deal of time. Tempered aether is incredibly hot, as it is merely a highly condensed and excited form of the aether the user commits to the process. Unlike regular aether, tempered aether does not have a definite shape; however, it is released from the body as a strong pulse, making it quite a powerful weapon. Although this use can be put to crude ends, Arcus also puts tempered aether to good use in conjunction with seals and Sorcerer's Silver.

Rapier Fencing (National Style)

A style of fencing widely practiced throughout the kingdom. Favoring sword-thrusts over all else, this style was created by Count Cremelia, under whom the Raythefts hold their estate. The swords preferred for the style are long and narrow, much like the rapiers in the man's world. This style is the one that

immediately comes to mind when a noble utters the word “fencing” within Lainur, and there are training halls both in the royal capital and in the larger cities. Fencing is one of Noah’s strong points, and Craib is no mere dabbler in it either.

The Phantom Twins

A pair of phantom twins described in *The Spiritual Age*; they take the form of young girls. According to the Ancient Chronicles, they worked to fine-tune the newly formed world to make it habitable.

The Holy Tower

A specialized prison on the outskirts of the capital devised specifically to hold magicians. Its name comes from it being the tallest structure in the capital, with its top reaching the clouds. The more heinous their crimes and the more skilled their magic, the higher the prisoners are kept. The walls are so sturdy it is impossible to destroy them using magic. Extra precautionary measures are taken for the more powerful and dangerous magicians; some are gagged while others have their tongues and teeth extracted. Formerly the remains of an ancient building, the tower cannot be replicated by modern methods, nor can its original materials be restored; hence, the tower was remodeled to become what it is today. According to Arcus, the inside looks like a laboratory from a science-fiction film. It is thought that the tower was originally built during the time of *The Magician’s Elegy*. Unknown to some, there is an elevator inside.

Bonus Stories

Rock, Paper...

When Arcus and Sue studied magic together, they would often end up buying snacks. The snacks here were not the cheap sort Arcus knew from the man's world; instead, they were more akin to a light meal, which you could buy from the stalls lining the streets.

It was often when their focus started to run out that one of them would go to fetch some food, and it was usually a coin that decided who. It was similar to how tough decisions were made in the man's world. They would launch the coin into the air with magic, and whoever called the side it landed on would be stuck with the errand. So far, Arcus found he was on the losing side slightly more often than Sue.

Today, they were getting hungry as usual.

"Wanna do this with the coin again, Arcus?" Sue asked.

"Actually, I was thinking we could try something else today."

"Oh?"

"Let's go for rock, paper, scissors."

"Rock, paper... scissors?" Sue echoed.

"That's right." Arcus put out his fist in the shape of "rock" to demonstrate.

As he knew, rock, paper, scissors was not a game that existed in this world. Arcus quickly explained how to play, and how the three different hand gestures fared against each other.

"First, you have to say 'rock, paper, scissors!' and bring your fist down on each word like this."

"Oh, so it's not too hard. I've never heard of a game like this, though. Where did you learn it?"

“Ah, I think someone just told me about it once, y’know...”

“I see. Someone told you about it, or you read it in a book... That’s what you always say whenever you come up with this stuff!”

Well, it wasn’t like he could tell her what had *really* happened.

“A-Anyway, let’s just do it, okay? Rock, paper...”

“Okay! Rock, paper...”

“Rock...”

“Rock...”

They were completely out of time with each other. Or rather, Sue was purposely not matching her rhythm with Arcus’s. It was like she was waiting for him to start, so she could then speak over him and take the lead. Despite the sweet smile on her face, Arcus had no doubt that his suspicions were correct.

“Let me start, okay? Rock, paper...”

“Wait a sec.”

Arcus blinked. “What?”

“Can we slow down a bit? It’ll be easier to keep time then.”

“Um... Okay, we’ll do that.”

“Great!” Sue smiled smugly.

Arcus again got the impression that she was trying very hard to take the lead.

“Roock...” Arcus began.

“Wait.”

“What is it now?!”

“Well, I’m gonna pick rock. So I was just wondering what you were gonna pick?”

“What is this, psychological warfare? We haven’t even played the first round!”

“C’mon, tell me what you’re gonna pick!” Sue demanded, ignoring Arcus’s

outburst.

“Paper,” Arcus replied after a reluctant pause.

“Right, paper! Makes sense, since I’m throwing rock.”

“So are you going to stick with rock?” Arcus asked. “If you do, you’ll lose.”

“Huh... Well, I guess I’ll just let you win today, then,” she replied in a tone that suggested she would do nothing of the sort.

If Sue believed Arcus when he said he’d throw paper, she should throw scissors. Therefore, Arcus should throw rock if he wanted to win... but of course, he didn’t believe Sue *would* throw scissors. If she knew Arcus would overthink things, she would probably then pick rock like she said she would to throw him off. Except then, if he followed the above logic, he would pick rock too, and they would tie—which was why she would pick paper to beat him instead. So if Arcus then picked paper—as he said he would—they would tie.

Right, I know. I’ll play scissors.

Having picked the weapon that would ensure his victory, the two began the game.

“Rock, paper, scissors!”

Arcus threw scissors. Sue threw rock.

“I thought you’d pick scissors! I win!” Sue declared with a smug smile.

Arcus was waiting for her to add “I told you I’d pick rock!,” but it never came.

“Why did you pick rock, then?” he asked.

“Huh? Well I just got the feeling you were gonna go for scissors.”

“You got a *feeling*?! That’s impossible!”

“Okay, well it was like... I could smell the metal from the scissors.”

To this day, Arcus has never won a game of rock, paper, scissors against Sue.

Teaching Lecia Magic

Arcus and Lecia were in the Raythefts’ garden.

“Are you going to be teaching me some magic today, Brother?”

“Yup. I did promise, after all.”

Joshua and Celine normally forbade them from spending any time together, but right now they weren't at home. These opportunities came by fairly often, and for the most part Arcus and Lecia spent them playing or catching up with each other. When Joshua and Celine were out for longer, though, Arcus would often teach Lecia some magic. These lessons were always carried out in one corner of the garden, the spot where Arcus liked to practice alone. Lecia's eyes were already sparkling with excitement; she loved magic just as her brother did, and seemed to have a hard time sitting still when it came to learning more.

“I'm gonna show you a spell called *Scrapped Arms* today.”

“*Scrapped Arms*? I don't believe I've come across it before. Does it perhaps come from a lesser-known text?”

“Nope. It's a spell I came up with myself.”

“Your own spell? That's quite the feat!” Admiration lit up Lecia's eyes.

Arcus felt slightly awkward under the powerful look in her gaze.

“O-Oh, y'think?”

“Yes! I have attempted to come up with some of my own, but whenever I show them to Father, it doesn't tend to go so well...”

Creating successful original spells was considered very difficult, even for graduates of the Institute, so it was easy to imagine how difficult it must be for a pair of children who were only taking their first steps as magicians.

“I manage to put the incantations together without issue. However, the implementation never seems to work properly. I take the most effective phrases I can find in the texts, and yet... nothing happens when I try to cast them.”

“Wait. Are you just taking the words and phrases from the text and copying them word-for-word when you put them into an incantation?”

“Yes, I am?”

“Thought so.”

That explained why her spells weren't working. You couldn't just cut-and-paste from a text and stick those phrases together to make a spell.

“Did the old bas— Sorry, did Joshua say anything when you showed him?”

“He just smiled and told me it was too early for me to be thinking about creating my own spells.”

So Joshua hadn't even told her where she went wrong. Joshua was usually so strict about her education, that if he thought it was necessary for her to be learning her own spells at this point, he would surely have told her where she was going wrong.

“I'm sure he just wants you to get some more experience first,” Arcus said. “Then he'll teach you.”

Joshua was likely worried that if he taught Lecia how to create spells, she would start tinkering with the ones she already knew, when she should be focusing on getting the basics down. Even Arcus could see the sense in his reasoning.

“Do you wanna learn?”

“I do! Oh, I do!”

Lecia was very intelligent for her age. She could probably understand the difference between making spells and practicing basic spells.

“The first thing you need to create your own spells is imagination. You start with thinking about what you want to change, or what you want to make happen, and then choose corresponding words and phrases to create your spell. You can't just choose words with good compatibility; it has to be more than that.”

“Imagination...”

“To cast any spell, you need an idea and a clear picture of the result in your mind. You need to look around you and observe and memorize how things move. Then, you need to try and recall those images at a later time. You can do it before falling asleep, if you want. That's how you'll get started.”

“I shall do my very best!”

“Shall we start with *Scrapped Arms*, then?”

Arcus took up position in front of the target to cast the spell. Noah had already gathered junk, broken or otherwise, for Arcus to practice with, so there was no risk of collateral damage.

“A greedy man longs to possess as much as he can without discretion. He is hungry even for the specks of dust on the ground. Take this unprejudiced right arm and receive all that it holds. Scrapped Arms!”

The junk rushed towards Arcus’s arm, causing Lecia to let out a gasp of admiration. After giving his huge, trash-laden arm a couple of swings, he steadied his fist as it pointed toward the target.

“Fly!”

The junk around his right arm flew forward and smashed into the target, burying it under a heap of garbage.

“That was amazing!”

Arcus felt a warm glow in his chest at his sister’s praise. He began to tell her about *Scrapped Arms*.

“The objects fly to your arm much faster than under the power of psychokinesis,” Lecia remarked.

“It helps to have a lot of junk available. There are limitations, though. Those objects have to be made by human hands.”

“You mean it is only really usable in an urban environment?”

“That, or where there are a lot of loose weapons, like on the battlefield or something.”

“Oh...”

“You know we might have to fight eventually, right?”

“I know...” Lecia bit her lip anxiously, but there was no sugarcoating the truth.

“We’re scions of a martial family; we don’t have another option. I wanna make my mark on this world, and you’re the heiress. All we can do is steel

ourselves for war when the time comes.”

“Yes, Brother! I shall do my very best!”

“Good. Now here’s an improved version.”

“A greedy man longs to possess as much as he can without discretion. He is hungry even for the specks of dust on the ground. Take all that is tucked under the sleeve of this unprejudiced left arm and vanquish the enemy before me! Scrapped Sleeve!”

This time, the junk gathered around Arcus’s left arm and formed a sleeve-like wing. It was just as huge as the result of the original version of the spell. Arcus brandished and waved it around like a whip.

“Sleeve Strike!”

Arcus swung his left arm down, sending the junk exploding from it in all directions. Where *Scrapped Arms* was a single target attack, *Scrapped Sleeve* had a much wider range.

“The spell utilizes each arm individually!” Lecia said.

“That’s right. Neat, huh?”

“Yes!”

“Here’s the incantation. Wanna have a go?” Arcus passed a small piece of paper to her.

I wish I could tell her about the aethometer...

And so, Arcus watched Lecia practicing magic until her parents returned home.

Magical Memorandum

Flamrune

An offensive flame-based spell. Upon casting the spell, a fiery spear appears at a spot of the magician's choosing. It does not need to be launched immediately, but holding it there for too long will cause it to disappear. It was originally created as a spell combining fire and spear-throwing, where the fire spear would appear in the caster's raised hand, and could then be launched at the enemy. Compared to its power, its incantation is simple, and so it has a long history as one of Lainur's army's staple spells. The incantation is: *"Turn my will to flame. May this single spear set the sky alight and burn through all who stand in my way."*

Snake Rope

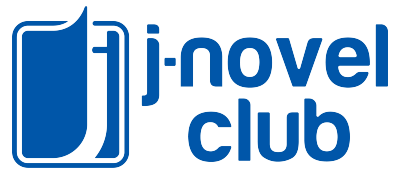
The spell Cazzy was about to cast when he first encountered Arcus. A supporting, binding-based spell. It's a spell based on the properties of rope and the movements of snakes. Casting the spell summons several ropes which slither across the ground and bind your opponent. The incantation is: *"May my power take the form of a rope and punish thee! Moreover, extend those tails back to me. Ancient snakes, crawl across the ground!"*

Flame Tongue

The spell Sue attempted against Cazzy. An offensive flame-based spell. Flames are whipped up into the air before diving towards their opponent. As Arcus points out, since it includes the instruction to "incinerate the darkness," it is weaker during daylight hours. The incantation is: *"May my burning tongue incinerate the darkness. Turn my screams of despair into winds of calamitous change. Set forth, and permeate the sky."*

Burning Laughter

The spell used by Gaston's hand-reared mercenaries. An offensive flame-based spell. This spell has the simple effect of summoning flame. However, it is highly powerful and effective. It is based on a description in the *Ancient Chronicles* of a group of merciless pyromancers out to collect a debt. It is popular with mercenaries and the Empire's military. The incantation is: *"He who bears fire cannot bear a heart. Corner and chase the debtor and burn the house down to the ground. That life too shall be your payment."*



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